JULY 25¢

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by WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

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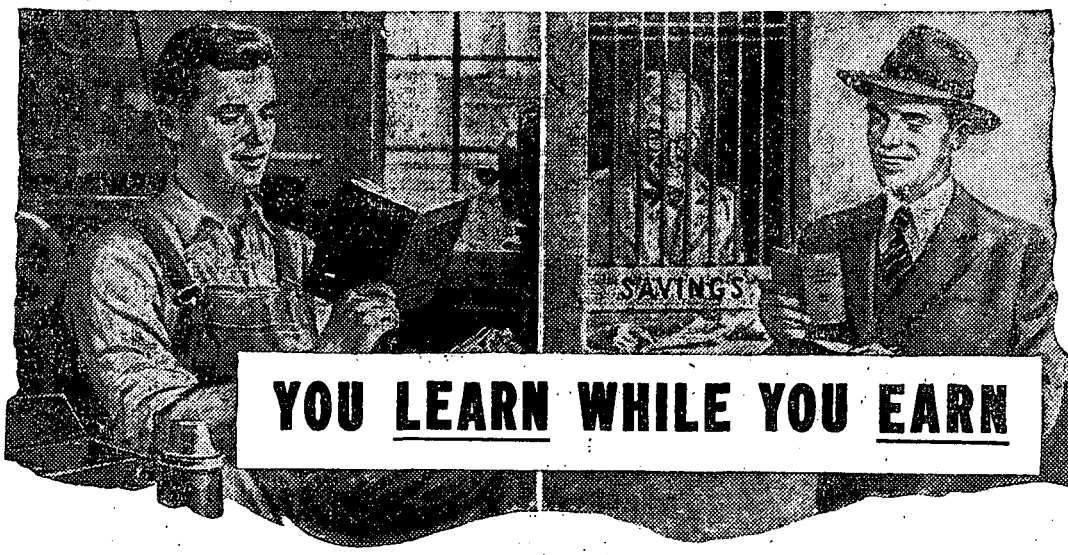

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Front cover painting by H. W. McCauley, illustrating a scene from "Goddess Of The Golden Flame."

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VOLUME 9 NUMBER 4

All Stories Complete

GODDESS OF THE GOLDEN FLAME (Short novel—27,500)..... by William P. McGivern.... 8
Illustrated by Malcolm Smith

Deep in the Himalayas was a cavern, and inthe cavern a golden flame goddess . . .

TOFFEE TAKES A TRIP (Novelette—18,000)..... by Charles F. Myers..... 50
Illustrated by McCauley

Marc Pillsworth took a vacation. So Toffee decided to take one too. But—

PETER BACKS A PUNCH (Novelette—19,000)..... by C. A. Baldwin..... 86
Illustrated by Rod Ruth

When the kindly old man with the halo backed his fighter, he went all the way . . .

LARGO (Short—6,500)..... by Theodore Sturgeon..... 122
Illustrated by Henry Sharp

The piece of music was called a largo, but the man who composed it knew differently . . .

SECRET OF THE YOMAR (Novelette—17,000)..... by Elroy Arno..... 134
Illustrated by Hinton

Stron heard the message calling him to his father's side—while death hovered near him . . .

CARRION CRYPT (Short—3,500)..... by Richard Casey..... 166
Illustrated by Krupa

They said the old crypt held ancient secrets— but they never spoke of death . . .

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

IT'S been a long time since William P. McGivern has graced the cover of your favorite magazine—too long a time we'd say. But this month he's back, with what we think is a terrific yarn. "Goddess of the Golden Flame" was written around the cover by McCauley, and after you finish with the story, see if you don't agree with us that Bill did a nice job. . . . We might point out in passing, that Bill McGivern took the fatal step a short while back. His wife (a writer in her own right—Maureen Daly) and he are now living in the wilds of Philadelphia. But we have it from Bill that he is gradually taming the city down. All we would like to know in answer to that, is who is taming McGivern down? (And he is being tamed, believe us.)

YOUR new favorite, *Toffee,* is back again this month, with another hilarious adventure. Mr. Myers has taken the "dream girl" and put her out on vacation. Maybe you think Toffee can't get into mischief with nothing but calm seas and sandy beaches around her. Well, maybe you're right at that, for Marc Pillsworth had something to do with it. Anyway, there's no point in us spoiling a heck of a good yarn for you by saying anything more. All we will say is that as far as we're concerned, Toffee has found a home—in FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. Are we right?

FOR those of you who like boxing matches, we're presenting C. A. Baldwin's latest contribution this month also. "Peter Backs a Punch" is the kind of a story an editor sits back and waits for—it's got action, adventure, humor, and what we think is as neat a bit of fantasy as you'd ever run across. Maybe you'd like to know just who is the greatest heavyweight champion of all time? Well, Mr. Baldwin says he knows, and goes on to write about it. Let us know what you think after you read it. There may be a difference of opinion on the outcome of the story—but not on the story itself.

THEODORE STURGEON returns with an unusual off-trail fantasy, entitled "Largo." Your editors must admit a soft spot inside us for the type of story that Mr. Sturgeon can write. You won't find a lot of action in this yarn, but you will find a deep, moving dramatic strain that is hard to put into a story—unless you're an expert. And Mr. Sturgeon has displayed his expertness not only in the past—but in this present story. See if the ending hits you like it did us. . .

WE'RE always glad to be able to present one of Elroy Arno's stories. He has proven his popularity with you many times in the past, and we are sure that his new story, "Secret of the Yomar" will be as big a hit as anything he has ever written. This story takes place on another world. It is about strange peoples, strange ideas, and even stranger events. It starts out in the primitive wilds of this planet, and takes you to places of eerie grandeur. There is enough action, adventure, and human emotion in this yarn to keep you panting for quite some time. (At least that's what it did to us when we first read it!)

LAST, but certainly not least this month, is Richard Casey's story, "Carrion Crypt." This is a yarn about an ancient Lama, and the curse that hung over a certain crypt. A crypt is a place where the dead lie in peace—supposedly. But in this crypt there could be no peace until—but, there we go again, almost spoiling the story for you. We'll just leave it at that and let you find out for yourself.

LOOKING ahead into the future we've really got some top-notch material coming up. Maybe you'd like to get a sort of sneak-preview. Well, for instance there's a story by one of your top favorites, Robert Bloch. He writes about a scientist who went off the deep end and started discovering things a sane man wouldn't possibly have found. It's a real gripping story that you'll get a chance to read in an early issue. Then there's a new *Toffee* adventure. (We can hear you cheering!) In this new adventure, Mr. Myers has the dream girl confronted with a bona-fide ghost. And if you don't think this can give rise to the most hilarious predicament Marc Pillsworth ever found himself in—you're wrong!

THEN there's a story by popular William P. McGivern, continuing his series about the musketeers. Remember them? This will be a real treat—and we've been holding it back jealously. But you'll get it soon. Other top-notchers like Chet Geier, Berkeley Livingston, William Lawrence Hamling, Richard Casey, Leroy Yerxa, and many others will also be on hand. Which just about winds up the preview, and this month's editorial. See you next month.—*Rap.*

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"The Strange Middle World"

...BEHIND YOUR CONSCIOUS MIND

YOU—your *conscious* self, is suspended between two worlds! There is the world of every day—of colors, sounds and substances. There is also the world of the universes—of moons, stars, and distant nebulæ.

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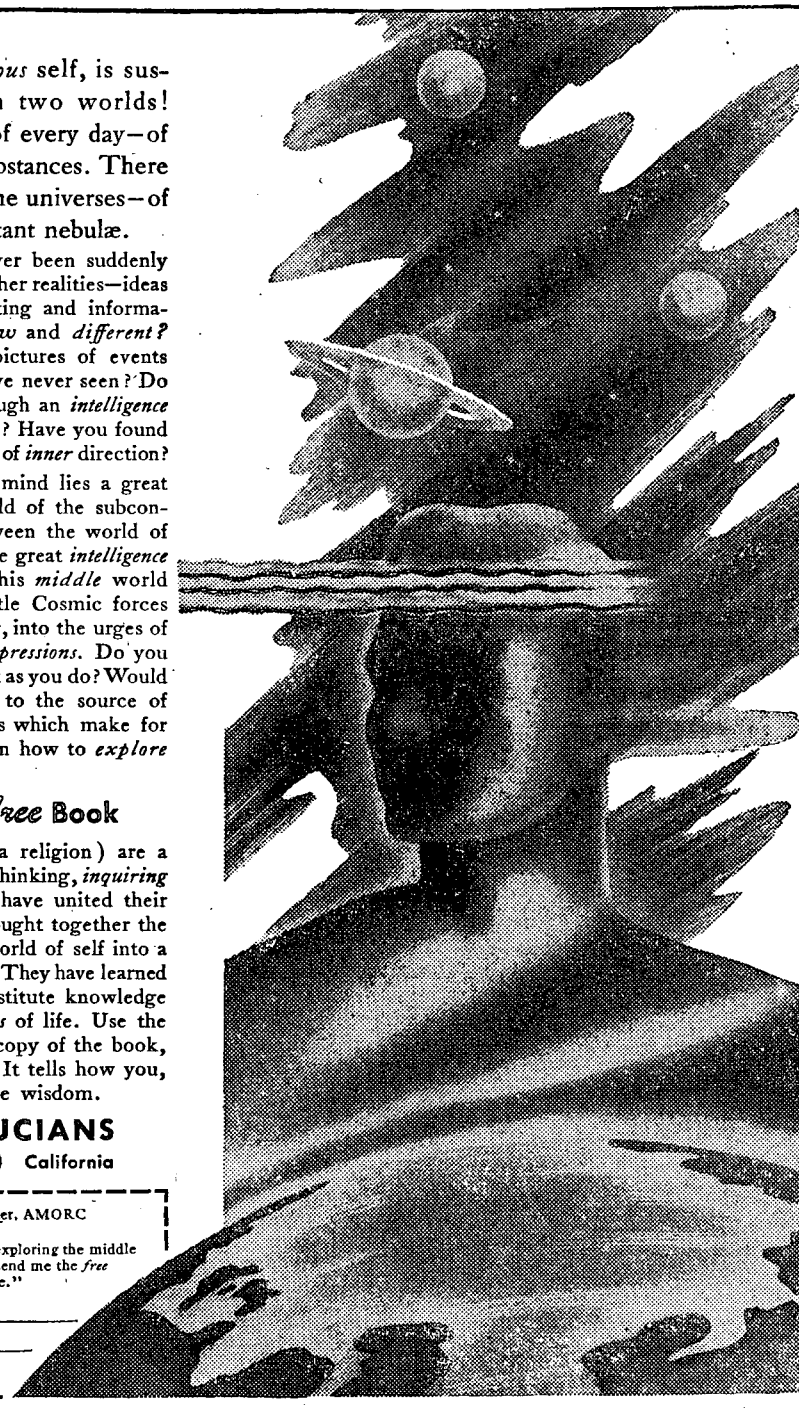

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Rick Mason was sent on a mission deep within the Himalayas—where he was to find a hidden secret—and a Goddess

AP August 19th. The four-engined passenger ship *Twilight* crashed early yesterday in an inaccessible region of the Himalayas. The plane, flagship of the Air France fleet, was carrying fourteen passengers from Paris to Shanghai. . . .

* * *

AP August 30th. Wreckage of a Swedish cargo plane, four days overdue, was discovered today in the southeastern section of the Vulka range of the Himalayas. Aerial photographs of the wreckage indicate the crew perished in the crash. . . .

* * *

UP September 14th. The War Department announced today that an ATC four-engined cargo ship had reported trouble on the Hump run last night. The plane was flying supplies from Delhi to Calcutta with a crew of four. The radio operator flashed an emergency signal at 9.33 EST, but gave no information as to the nature of the trouble. . . . (ADD NU Sept. 14th.) A late bulletin from the War Department this morning: Cargo ship Y-25, reported last night in distress, is believed to have crashed. . . .

* * *

Major Rick Mason received orders on Sept. 17th to report immediately to General Armstrong of G2. He thanked the orderly who brought him the message, then lit a cigarette and sat down on the edge of his bed. He was tall, with graying black hair and deceptively mild gray eyes. His face was lined and hard, deeply tanned and generally devoid of expression.

After reading the orders a second time he got to his feet and slipped on his Ike jacket, picked up his cap and left the room. . . .

General Armstrong's office was on the ninth floor of the Pentagon. The General's orderly, a regular army master sergeant, told Rick to go right in.

Rick opened the door and walked into a broad, surgically clean office, furnished with the lean spare efficiency of the professional soldier. Sun from three wide windows made a dappled design on a plain gray carpet; there were eight straight backed chairs arranged uniformly on the right of the room facing a large aerial map of Southeast Asia.

Behind a desk on the opposite side of the room sat General Armstrong, a man of medium height with thinning hair and icy blue eyes. He wore the two silver stars of Major General rank on each shoulder; on his left breast was one lone ribbon, the Distinguished Service Cross.

RICK saluted. "Major Rick Mason reporting as directed, sir."

General Armstrong returned the salute. "At ease, Major." His voice was dry and precise. "Two more officers will arrive shortly. I will tell you then why I instructed you to report here."

"Very well, sir."

General Armstrong looked at a file of papers on his desk, then glanced at Rick. "I've made a study of your service record, Major. You enlisted in the Canadian Air Force in nineteen

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thirty-eight. Any reason for that preference?"

"I thought they might get in before we did, sir."

"Prior to that you were with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain. You were wounded twice."

"Nothing very serious, sir."

"You transferred from the CRAF to the Army Air Corps in forty-one in England. Spent the next four years flying escort for various Heavy Bomb Groups. Received the DFC with two clusters, the Air Medal with fifteen clusters, the Purple Heart. Good record, Mason."

"Thank you, sir."

"Are you married, Major?"

"No, sir."

"Any particular reason why not?"

"One fight at a time has always been my motto, sir."

General Armstrong nodded. He looked as if he might smile but he didn't. "That's all for that, Major. Sit down until the other officers arrive."

"Yes, sir."

He took a seat in a straight backed chair and held his cap in his lap. General Armstrong returned to the papers on his desk.

A few minutes later the door opened and a first Lieutenant entered. He was young, about twenty four, Rick guessed. with a clear complexion, blond hair and earnest blue eyes.

He saluted General Armstrong and said: "Lieutenant Peter Rundell reporting as directed, sir."

"At ease, Lieutenant. This is Major Rick Mason."

Rick stood up, shook hands with the young lieutenant.

General Armstrong said, "The third officer will be along presently." He studied again the papers on his desk.

Rick raised an eyebrow and shrugged. The lieutenant grinned faintly and they both sat down. The General glanced at them after a while. "You may talk and smoke if you like."

Rick took out a pack of cigarettes, offered one to the lieutenant who refused; he lit his own and inhaled deeply.

"Hot, isn't it?"

"Very hot," the lieutenant said.

"It'll probably get worse."

"Probably."

That, Rick decided, took care of the talking. He wondered idly what General Armstrong had on his mind; but he wasn't too curious. Years of experience with army authority had made a fatalist of him. He did what he was told. He expected the same implicit obedience from any man under him.

THE door opened again and a stocky captain came through, reported to the General. His name was Christopher Deveer. He was short but wide and he looked as if he'd be heavily muscled. His skin was dark, his hair black and coarse and his eyes were green and sharp. There was an air of belligerence about him, a feeling of inner pressures. He looked hard, capable and tenacious.

General Armstrong introduced him to Rick and the lieutenant. He said, "I'd like your attention now. Will you please sit there where you can face the map on the wall."

The three officers took seats as directed.

The General came from behind his desk and stood facing them, his back to the map. His icy blue eyes ticked them off, one at a time; he looked grimly serious.

"First; everything I say to you will be confidential. You will not discuss it with anyone. Furthermore you will not discuss it among yourselves. This is a direct order. Do you all under-

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stand?"

The three officers nodded and Rick felt a stir of interest. He had heard orders of that sort during the war; and they were usually a tip-off that something hot and nasty was brewing.

General Armstrong relaxed slightly and smiled. "I'm not going to make this very formal. What I have to tell you is first a story of an American failure, secondly a reminder about some curious business that is now going on, and thirdly a theory to explain it. The three things link together in logical sequence so I'll begin with the story of a mistake, or better, a miscalculation, we made during the worst days of the war.

"When we began working on the development of an atomic bomb we, as you know, recruited scientists from every part of the world. Some came from England; others from Ireland, India, China and South America. For security reasons we routed this very important human cargo in ways to eliminate any idea of what was actually happening. We didn't want the Germans or the Japs to know the men we were bringing together. Had they known they could have made a simple guess as to the nature of the work they were going to do. So we brought some by plane, others by boat and rail. We detoured them as often as possible, just as a convoy on the high seas will zigzag to throw off submarines."

He turned and picked up a pointer from his desk and walked to the map. "Now this is the story of Dr. James Norton, a British nuclear scientist whom we were instructed to bring to Oak Ridge. Dr. Norton was in London in forty-one. He was one of the best men Britain had in this field. He was internationally known and our job was to get him here safely, first of all, and secondly without arousing suspicion."

HE PLACED the pointer against the wall, about a foot from the edge of the map. "Assume this position is London. We picked up Dr. Norton there and flew him by special plane to Calcutta. From there another plane was to take him East to Australia. This necessitated a trip across the hump, but we took that chance. That was a bad mistake. Dr. Norton's plane was shot down by Jap fighters near the Vulka range of the Himalayas. Aerial reconnaissance showed that the plane made a crash landing and stayed in one piece."

He moved the pointer east across the map to the Himilayas.

"About here they crashed. Now we wanted Dr. Norton badly. We would have sent an Airborne Army in after him, but we couldn't afford to let the Japs know there was such big game loose in their own backyard. They had garrisons scattered through this area and one of their patrols might have picked up the survivors of the crash. Dr. Norton was travelling in the uniform of a British officer, with credentials and papers made out accordingly. We figured the Japs wouldn't know his identity. If we sent an invasion force in to get him they'd know he was important.

"So we sent two special combat teams into that area. They made contact with the plane. The pilots had been killed and left at the scene of the crash, but there was no sign of Dr. Norton."

He stopped and put the pointer back on his desk. "That is the story of an American miscalculation. We have never found Dr. Norton. He is presumed dead by most of those who know anything about the matter. Now to the second point. Have you read of the three recent plane crashes in the Vulka range of the Himalayas?"

The three men nodded and he went

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on: "One was a transport of Air France; the second was a Swedish ship; the third was one of our ATC flights. Now we got a flash from the radio operator before the plane went down. He said, 'Emergency. Plane in flames. No warning. . . .' That was all he apparently had time to say. We know the plane crashed soon after that, although we haven't released that news as yet. Also, we haven't given the press the text of the radio operator's message.

"The War Department has instructed G2 to look into this matter very carefully. Frankly our theory is this: those crashes were not accidental. They were caused deliberately by a force or weapon we do not understand. We think that weapon is being used by a garrison located in the Vulka area of the Himalayas. If you'll remember we never did round up all the Jap soldiers in that area. We simply couldn't. There were too many of them, they were too scattered and the area was too large. We thought they constituted no menace. The terrain is wild and we figured they would die off or drift into small harmless groups and work their way slowly out of the interior. That has happened, of course, in many instances. But there are a lot unaccounted for.

"We aren't sure yet what is going on. But this is a possibility. That a garrison of Japanese troops is still operating in that area. That they may have been the group which picked up Dr. Norton. That they have developed a new and dangerous weapon."

He picked up the pointer again. "We aren't sure of that," he said slowly. "But when you men get back from your mission we hope to know more. Do you understand?"

The young lieutenant, Peter Rundell, swallowed audibly.

"We're going there?"

"Yes," General Armstrong said. "What do you men think of the mission?"

Captain Deveer shrugged. "Can I speak frankly, sir?"

"As frankly as you like."

"It looks like a wild goose chase, sir."

The general looked at Rick. "And you? Do you have any opinion about what I've told you?"

"It's a job, sir," Rick said casually.

"Precisely. Gentlemen, don't underestimate the importance of this job. The War Department is sending you because they are gravely worried."

"Sir, what exactly will we be expected to do?" Rick asked.

"You're going to land at a specific point in the Vulka chain. From there you'll scout until you find evidence supporting our theory. Or until you find it is groundless."

"When do we leave?"

"Next week. Your plane, a stepped-up C-46, is being readied. You will receive detailed instructions as to where you'll land, how you'll communicate and so on. You, Major Mason, will be in command. We want you back in a month. Anything else?"

There were no questions.

"That will be all at this time," General Armstrong said. "And remember this: You three men are, as of now, committed to a mission that demands complete security. What I said before about not discussing this I want to emphasize. Don't talk! I hope that is clear. That's all."

THE next morning Rick received orders that kept him busy for the rest of the week. He, Deveer and Peter Rundell were taken in tow by a Colonel who briefed them on the trip. They worked day and night, poring over maps, studying codes, memorizing methods of procedure to follow in all

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possible emergencies. During this time Rick had an opportunity to study Peter and Deveer.

Peter was an idealist with no windmills to joust with. He wanted to improve the world, but he was too young to realize that things like that are accomplished over centuries, not years. His brother had been killed in the war. Peter had gotten in at the tail end of it, and he felt guilty and dissatisfied. But he was cheerful, pleasant company. He was hard working, generous and loyal.

Deveer was a more interesting type to Rick. He was thirty years old, unmarried and from what he could gather, had few close friends. There was some tension in the man that defied explanation. He smoked cigarettes with deep nervous pulls as if he couldn't quite get enough of them. He ate the same way, rapidly, greedily, never talking. Everything he did was done with cold furious energy. He seemed to be racing the clock always fearful that his time would come and he wouldn't be ready.

Rick learned that he had flown with the Flying Tigers and then had switched to the Army Air Force. When he asked him about it Deveer shrugged.

"There was a thousand dollar bonus for every Nip we got in the Tigers. That's why I was in it. The dough, Major."

He was a man with ambition. He needed a handhold, a grip somewhere on something, and then he could pull the earth in his direction. But without it he charged, pent-up, and the energy crackled and slipped away from him in the way he ate, drank, smoke and probably loved. He was intelligent, alert, and he worked with an energy that was violent. But he kept to himself and there was seldom a smile on his dark broad face.

The fifth day of their preparations Rick received orders to report to General Armstrong. He found the General in his office talking to a young, red-haired girl. The general introduced her to him as Clare Holloway.

Rick nodded to her and said hello. She was a tall girl with fine square shoulders, a trim waist and long slim legs. She wore a white linen suit, white gloves and shoes. She was tanned which looked interesting with her bright red hair. There was a coolness, an amused detachment about her that probably went for poise, Rick decided. He imagined it could get annoying.

General Armstrong looked down at the shining top of his desk and said in a sharp voice: "Major Mason, Miss Holloway will accompany you on your trip. You will see that she's well taken care of."

Clare Holloway smiled. "Don't let that scare you, Major. I can take care of myself."

He looked at her without expression, but his lean angular face darkened and he couldn't dull the edge of his voice. "I'm sure you can."

He waited for the general to amplify his statement but there wasn't anything more. He said, "Very well, sir. Will you excuse me now?"

"After a moment." The general glanced pointedly at Clare Holloway. "Would you excuse us please?"

The girl smiled. "I can take a hint. Big hush-hush talk, eh? I'll run along then." She looked at Rick and shook her head in mock disappointment. "I was hoping you'd be fun. But you're a grim character."

She left the office then. Rick looked after her and in spite of his irritation he noticed that she had a pair of excellent legs.

"Well?" General Armstrong said, leaning back in his chair. "What do you think?"

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"About what?"

"About your passenger?"

"If you told me to take along the front line of the Rockettes I'd do it. But I'd think it was crazy."

"You'd be right. You're right in thinking this thing is crazy. But the pressure came from way up on top. I was helpless. Miss Holloway is a photographer. She is also the niece of a very important person. Something about this trip leaked out and she decided she wanted to go along.

"I tried to block it, but I couldn't raise hell without tipping off everybody in the capitol that this trip is a hot one. So I let it slide."

"I've been studying maps of the terrain. It's no place for a girl."

"I know that," General Armstrong said.

"And there's a good chance of running into trouble."

"I know that."

"Supposing something happens to her?"

The general chuckled grimly. "That would make me very happy. But you'd probably be court-martialed anyway."

"I'll see that she doesn't skin her nose, then."

The general came around the desk and patted Rick unexpectedly on the arm. "I'm sorry about it, boy. But remember this. The job comes first."

"I'll remember," Rick said.

TWO days later as the first fingers of dawn were probing from the East, Rick walked to the side of a C-47 that was waiting on a hardstanding at Washington airport.

Peter Rundell came to the port hatch and grinned at him.

"We're all set, Skipper. Deveer is up checking the control. The tower gave us a take-off time at four-thirty."

Rick said, "Good. How about the girl?"

"She hasn't shown yet.'

She arrived twenty minutes later in a chauffeur-driven station wagon.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said, smiling at Rick. "But I had a big farewell party last night at which I was taken unexpectedly drunk."

"Get aboard," Rick said.

"Where do you get the energy to be so unpleasant?" she said.

"You're twenty minutes late," Rick snapped. "This is not a goddam tea party I'm running."

"All right." She took a deep angry breath and turned toward the plane. Rick caught her arm and swung her around. He pointed at her chauffeur who was struggling toward the ship with three grips.

Beside the station wagon there was a small steamer trunk and two cameras.

"What's all this?"

"Luggage."

"You were told the weight limit of one hundred pounds, I believe?"

"Yes, but it just wasn't enough. What's a few extra pounds, anyway?"

"Just a few extra pounds that aren't going aboard, that's all."

"But it's already here," she cried.

"It will stay here, then."

"Oh, you're impossible." She turned to the chauffeur. "Put the cameras and one grip aboard. Take the rest back to my hotel."

She swung around to Rick, eyes hot. "Now are you satisfied?"

"Get aboard," he said, and walked toward the front of the ship. When he came back after checking the motors she was sitting in one of the bucket seats toward the rear of the plane. She avoided his eyes.

He ordered Peter to close the hatches, then went forward to the cockpit. Deveer nodded to him from the co-pilot's seat.

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"Tower says for us to get the hell out of here."

"Good."

He switched on the motors, warmed them for several minutes, then taxied down to the head of the runway. Deveer watched the instruments his face impassive.

"Flight U-10 to Tower," Rick said. "Request permission for take-off."

"Tower to U-10. Tower to U-10. Use runway seven. Climb to four thousand. Keep your landing lights on until you're twenty-five miles beyond let down zone. Take off when you're ready."

"Roger!" Rick said.

He fed gas to the ship, revving the motors to maximum. Then he slacked off the power and cut the brakes. The plane started down the runway, gathering speed rapidly. She was a hot ship for her classification. Rick could instantly tell.

He eased back the stick and felt the familiar lifting buoyancy as the ship climbed into its element. He circled the capitol once, then set a course Northeast at six thousand feet. They hit rough weather for a while, but it eased off within a half hour. Rick gave the controls over to Deveer and then went aft.

The girl was sitting in the door beside the port hatch, glassy-eyed and pale. He knew the rough weather must have snapped the tail of the ship around violently, and he knew what this must have done to her stomach.

She looked at him and took a deep careful breath.

He grinned. "You'll find a bucket back with the gear."

"I'm—I'm not sick."

She swayed forward a little and then she scrambled to her feet. He pointed aft to the luggage with his forefinger.

She staggered away.

CHAPTER II

BELOW them clouds formed a white carpet. Ahead and to the left snow-capped peaks broke through the clouds like jagged teeth.

They were flying the Hump at twenty-two thousand feet. Deveer and Rick were in the cockpit, Deveer at the controls.

He said, "How much further?"

Rick checked the grid map that hung above the controls.

"Not too long. According to the map we're entering the Vulka chain now. In about an hour we should see Mount Kellar, the highest in the group. After that we change our course to Southeast and drop down to find the plateau."

"Think we'll find it?" Deveer said.

"I think so."

Deveer smiled tightly and looked over at Rick with his flat green eyes. "Then what? We start our boy scout tactics. Build bon fires and roast marshmallows."

"You don't think much of this deal, do you?"

"Do you?" Deveer said bitterly.

"I'm not paid to think," Rick said. "If I was I'd probably be making a lot less money. It's just a job. If they want us to scout around and look for Dinosaur teeth, that's what we'll do."

"I wish I had your attitude," Deveer said. "It must be nice going through life without thinking. Sort of like a nice quiet vegetable."

"What's eating you, Deveer?" Rick said curiously. "You're no kid. If you don't like the army why not get the hell out?"

"What else can I do? I've been in the army ten years now. It's all I know."

"You should be used to it then."

"I'm used to it all right. I'm used

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to taking orders, to being pushed around like something made out of cogs and wheels."

"Well," Rick said, "What do you want?"

"I want to do some pushing around myself," Deveer said savagely. "I was twenty when I joined the army. You know why?" He flashed a hot look at Rick. "I couldn't find a better deal outside. My old man was a drunk. My mother worked in a cheap gin mill. When they were home together they take turns beating hell out of me. There was never any food in the place. I worked as a bootblack one summer trying to save enough dough to go to a trade school and learn something that would get me out of that life. You know what happened? The old man found the dough and blew it on a three day drunk.

"I hit him when he came home. Damn near knocked his head off and then I cleared out. I hooked up with the army in thirty-seven and asked for foreign service. I hated them and I hated everything I came from. I wanted to get away. So the army sent me to China. They taught me how to service planes and then they taught me how to fly. When the Nips started acting up I saw what was coming. I got out of the army when my enlistment was up and joined the Tigers. Not for patriotism, not for fun. I wanted that thousand buck premium we got for shooting down Japs. This war might have something worthwhile to you; to me it was just another scramble with the big people kicking hell out of the little people. I like the side of the big people. When you're on that side you can do a lot of pushing and shoving and get away with it."

"That's not much of a deal for the little people," Rick said.

"Then let 'em get smart. Let 'em get in with the Bigs. I'm taking care of myself and nobody else. If the other people won't come out of the rain that's their tough luck. I'll sell 'em coffins when they get pneumonia and die. And I'll overcharge 'em if I can."

"You sound like Old Scrooge," Rick grinned. "Better watch out. You'll get religion like he did and you won't know what hit you."

DEVEER looked sideways at him without smiling. "Think it's a joke, eh? A lot of funny stuff. Well you're way off. I stuck in the army hoping for a break. I thought I had it when I was transferred to Washington. I thought I could make myself important to somebody and trade these captain's bars in for an eagle, maybe. That's working fine, isn't it? Here I am now off on a boy scout camping expedition. Well, I'll get what I want some day. I'll find a grip on this stinking world and make it yell for help."

"That's been done before. The trouble is help generally comes and the guy with the grip finds himself in a big fat mess."

"I'll take that chance," Deveer said quietly.

" 'Better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven' " Rick quoted.

Deveer looked at him carefully. "Who said that?"

"A guy named Lucifer," Rick said.

"Oh. Well he had the right idea."

"Look where it got him."

"Maybe it won't work in fairy tales. That's because the people who write fairy tales want everybody else to believe there's no use fighting. Then when everyone is standing around like cows, hoping for the best and talking about 'Fate' and 'The will of God' they can take over. The world is full of people who want to be slaves because they can stop worrying then about do-

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ing their own thinking. Well, I'll find me a bunch of slaves before I get through and they won't have anything more to worry about."

"You've got some cute ideas," Rick said. "Just don't let them shake around too much or they're liable to explode. There's nothing sadder than the pieces a Fascist leaves around when he blows up."

"I'm not a Fascist. I'm just thinking of myself."

"A very fine distinction," Rick said dryly.

He stood up and went aft. Clare Holloway was lying on an improvised bed, made of blankets folded over four of the bucket seats. She was wearing a sweater and scarf under a leather flying suit but she looked cold.

"Do we have to stay up so ridiculously high?" she asked.

He stopped and looked at her. "No we could go down where it's warmer and crash into the side of a mountain. Would that appeal to you?"

"I asked a civil question."

"I didn't notice any civility."

"Do you always wear brass knuckles on your tongue?" she said quietly. "Are you afraid people will think you're soft if you don't keep snapping at them?"

"I never thought about it that way," Rick grinned, "and I can promise you I never will."

He left her and walked down to Peter who was studying a chart of the Vulka range. He sat down beside him and glanced at the chart.

"Looks like nice country, doesn't it?"

Peter shook his head sadly. "Wonderful. Just the place for a spring vacation. Hot and cold running snakes. Exposures on all sides. Best canned food this side of Calcutta." He smiled at Rick. "Do I sound like the Chamber of Commerce?"

"Not quite. But we should be landing in an hour or so. You'd better break out the ammo for the forty-fives. There's no point in not being ready to take a pot at those snakes of yours."

"Okay, I'll get at it."

"Good."

HE WALKED back toward the control room. Clare Holloway turned on her side and grinned sourly at him. "Still the little ray of sunlight, aren't you?"

He stopped. Am I supposed to understand that?"

"I heard your instructions to Peter about ammunition. Was that for my benefit, or are you actually scared?"

"The only thing I'm afraid of is that you'll get bit by a snake."

"How considerate of you," she said, mockingly.

"Yes, isn't it? You see I'm worried about the snake. He probably won't recover."

He saw the color mount in her cheeks and he grinned and went on forward to the cockpit. Deveer looked at him, then pointed ahead.

"There's Kellar, I think."

Rick saw a twin peak jutting up through the clouds several miles ahead. The peaks were knife-sharp and they looked like the prongs of a tuning fork.

"I think you're right," he said. He checked the chart carefully and compared the position of Kellar on their small scale grid map. "Not much doubt about it. Swing Southeast and start dropping down."

Deveer nodded and shoved the stick forward. The clouds came up to meet them and then they were suddenly blinded by swirling whiteness as the nose of the plane burrowed into the soft banks.

"Creepy, isn't it?" Deveer muttered.

"Not much fun."

They broke through the clouds into

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brilliant sunlight. Ahead of them lay a broad plateau, formed by the sheer cliffs of the mountains.

"I hope it's okay for a landing," Deveer said.

"According to the dope they gave us it's like a pool table," Rick said.

"With all the balls on it?"

"I think it's okay. Make a pass at it and we'll try and get a look."

Deveer swung the ship around and roared across the valley, dropping down to a height of several hundred feet. He banked sharply at the end of the valley, and while the plane was on its side both men peered downward, trying to get an impression of the ground.

"Not bad," Deveer said, straightening out. 'Hard to tell though. We can't do much more than crash and set the gas on fire."

"That's a consolation," Rick said dryly. "Okay, set her down. If you feel like it."

"I don't feel like it," Deveer said, using one of his rare grins. "But I guess I'm about the best damn pilot in the world so I couldn't be in better hands. If there is a billiard ball on the table I can land right on top of it."

"Give me one of your smokes when we get down," Rick said. "I want to enjoy your rosy dreams, too."

"I'm good," Deveer said. He wasn't smiling now. He was serious and his jaw was set hard. "I'm good, brother, and that's no pipe dream. Here we go!"

THE landing was perfect. Deveer set the plane down lightly and taxied across the plateau to the base of a towering peak. He cut the ignition and glanced over at Rick. "I'm good, all right," he said.

"You're good," Rick admitted.

He went aft and picked up a forty-five from the seat. He took off his heavy flying clothes and strapped the gun about his lean waist. None of the men wore army uniforms. Just gray whipcord slacks and shirts. The heat in the plane was already growing intense. Clare Holloway stripped off her flight jacket and said. "If you gentlemen will excuse me I'm getting into something comfortable."

"You're excused," Rick said.

He opened the port hatch and dropped to the ground. Peter hopped down beside him. The ground was dry, hard-baked and covered with a six inch stubble of coarse vegetation. Overhead the sun hung in the sky like a fiery brass ball.

Peter mopped his forehead and said, "This is just what I was hoping for. Nice balmy weather. Hell you could sun tan here in five minutes. If you stayed out any longer you'd be like an old boot."

Rick walked around the plane and took a good look at the plateau. It was almost ten miles long and about two miles around. The entrance was a narrow aperture formed by the twin peaks of Mount Kellar. Ranges on three other sides made a bowl of the valley. Close to the bases of the mountains forests and underbrush grew in a tangled snarl. There were gashes visible in the ring of mountains that surrounded the valley; but whether these led to outer territory was impossible to tell without investigation.

He came back to Peter. Deveer was also standing beside the plane, a cigarette hanging from his lips, his face hard and bleak.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Rick took a small-scale map from his pocket and squatted down, spreading the map on the dusty ground.

"Take a look," he said. Deveer and Peter hunched beside him and he went on: "Dr. Norton's plane crashed roughly within a five or six mile radius

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of here. It might have been in the valley we're in, but anyway, that's what we're going to look for. But first we're going to take a look around this immediate area and get an idea of what we're up against. Before we set up a camp tonight I want to look around. We'll split up in two teams and cover about a square mile on each side of the ship. Then we'll come back here and break out the supplies. Keep your eye out for water and a camp site."

"Two teams," Deveer said. He jerked his head toward the plane. "Does that mean somebody takes Miss Richbitch along?"

"We can't leave her here," Rick said. He dug a coin from his pocket and said, "Do likewise, gentlemen. Odd man loses."

Deveer grinned as he and Peter took coins out and flipped them in the air. They caught them, put them on the backs of their wrists.

Rick flipped his and they took their hands away and looked at the results. Deveer and Peter had tails; Rick had a head.

Deveer stood up quickly. "Let's go Peter. The Skipper loses."

"Okay," Rick said. "Take the left side of the ship. Cover a square mile and try and get back in two hours. And take care of yourselves."

DEVEER slapped the heavy gun on his hip. "This'll take care of me." He walked off, taking long fast strides, his head swinging nervously to the right and left. Peter followed him as he headed for the base of the mountain.

Rick slapped a mosquito on the back of his neck and watched them with a frown. Deveer was a capable man, a solid competent man who would be fine in a pinch. But his restlessness, his savage need to release the pressure inside him could cause trouble.

"Where are they going?"

Rick turned. Clare Halloway was standing in the open hatch, looking after Peter and Deveer. She was wearing white shorts, a white silk shirt and leather moccasins with white ankle socks.

"What in hell kind of an outfit is that supposed to be?" he exploded.

She jumped lightly down beside him. "Don't you think it's smart?"

"I think it's the silliest thing I ever saw. What do you think this sun will do to you?"

"Give me a nice smooth tan that would cost me a lot of money at Sun Valley," she said.

"The mosquitoes will treat you like a blue plate special," he said.

"You can't blame them for their good taste, can you?"

"Well, they're your legs."

"They're pretty nice, too, aren't they?"

He glanced down at her legs. They were long, slim and white. "They're fine," he said. "Just the right number."

"The original iceberg man," she said, shaking her head. "The Army should send you with Byrd instead of to a place like this."

"Deveer and Peter are taking a swing around to the left. We're going to cover the right. Shall we get started or do you want to chatter about my sex life."

"I can think of nothing less interesting," she said angrily. "I think you're boorish, crude, insulting—"

"And I used to beat my mother," he said wearily. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

"Let's hit it, then."

He struck off right of the plane and headed for the forests, walking rapidly. After about a hundred yards he could hear her panting.

"Where's the fire?" she called out.

"I want to get back before it's dark,"

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he said. "If this is too fast I'll slow up. I expected you to cave in pretty soon anyway."

"Oh, you're so *damn* rugged!" she cried. "A great big tough hero. Well, this pace is fine for me," she said, gasping on the last word.

He grinned and kept going.

When they reached the scanty woods he was forced to slow down because the underbrush grew in a practically impassable tangle. She caught up with him then, came up on his side.

"Why didn't you send me with Peter or Deveer if I'm so unpleasant," she said. "It's obvious you don't like me and won't give me half a chance to prove you might be wrong."

He looked directly at her. She was panting and her face was damp with perspiration. "We flipped a coin to see who'd get stuck with you. I lost," he said.

She took several deep breaths and then she nodded.

"That's plain enough," she said.

He hadn't meant to tell her that. A girl—any girl—would be a handicap out here. It wasn't a question of personalities. That made it a pretty low blow and he felt cheap. He started to say something, but he knew from the look on her face that it wouldn't help.

So he said, "Let's go."

CHAPTER III

PETER and Deveer stopped for a cigarette after covering about two miles. The place they stopped at was a small, natural amphitheatre formed by a depression in the ground with walls of rock on three sides.

"Cooler here, isn't it?" Peter said.

"Yeah." Deveer sat on a rotting stump and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "I'll be glad to get back and get a camp set up. This is strictly for the birds."

Peter sat on the ground and smoked his cigarette slowly. Finally he pushed a lock of yellow hair from his eyes and grinned at Deveer.

"You don't think much of this trip, do you?" he said.

Deveer smiled faintly. "Here we go again."

"What do you mean?"

"The Skipper and I were kicking that around a little while ago. No, I don't think much of it."

They finished their cigarettes in silence. The air was hot and oppressive. Dozens of gnats and mosquitoes buzzed around their heads. The ground was hard and dry.

Deveer finally got to his feet. "Let's get this finished," he said. "Watch out how you put that cigarette out."

"Okay."

They started for the opening that led into the small depression when a voice sounded suddenly:

"Halt! Put your hands in the air!"

The two men looked at each other and then they raised their hands slowly. They turned their heads, looking for the man who had spoken.

On top the stone wall on their left a rifle caught a flash from the sun; holding the rifle was a man with yellow skin and flat alert eyes. Beside him was another man and his rifle was also pointed at them. They shifted their eyes about and saw more of the brown men.

From the three walls at least a dozen rifles were trained on them.

"Okay, what next?" Deveer said, raising his voice slightly.

There was no answer from the men on top of the walls.

A minute passed and then they heard footsteps coming through the underbrush. A slim young man appeared suddenly in the aperture through which

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they had entered the amphitheatre.

The young man was Japanese. He was tall for his race, well built in slim graceful lines. He was wearing a gray green uniform. His eyes were black and his skin was light yellow. He was smiling, displaying white, even teeth.

"Permit me," he said. "I am Lieutenant Kato. I hope I haven't startled you."

"My name is Deveer. This is my friend, Peter Rundell," Deveer said. "You startled hell out of us, brother. We didn't know there was anyone else around."

"That's unfortunate," Lieutenant Kato said.

A small stock Japanese appeared behind Lieutenant Kato. The Lieutenant said something sharply to him in Japanese and the stock man trotted to Deveer's side. He took the cartridge belt and gun off, then did the same to Peter.

"Can we take our hands down now?" Deveer said dryly.

"Yes. Yes, of course," the slim Lieutenant said, smiling. "We can't take a chance, you know. You men are undoubtedly friendly but there are only a few of us so we must be cautious. You will come along with me now?"

"What for?" Deveer said bluntly.

The lieutenant shrugged, then shot a significant glance upward at the rifles. "That's a good enough reason, isn't it?"

"We're United States citizens," Peter said.

THE lieutenant glanced at him and his face was now impassive. "Yes, I know about the United States. I went to college there. A charming place. But in spite of our mutual information and interest in your country I must insist that you come with me." His voice and face hardened. "Otherwise I'll be forced to instruct my men to shoot. They are good marksmen. They won't kill you but they would enjoy testing their skill with, say, a shot at your shoulder or ankle."

Deveer shrugged. "Okay, we'll come along. Nothing else to do. Where are you taking us?"

"You will see soon enough," Kato smiled. "Please follow me."

Deveer and Peter glanced at each other, then followed the lieutenant through the opening of the amphitheatre into the tangled forest. The Jap riflemen scrambled down the walls on which they had been perched and collected themselves about the two Americans.

They were small, ragged men, wearing the remnants of Japanese uniforms. Their faces were blank and impassive, but they moved about with military alertness.

The lieutenant snapped a few words at them in Japanese and they fell in beside the Americans in two orderly columns. Kato took a place beside Deveer and jerked his head.

"We have a long march," he said.

The double column moved ahead. For an hour they marched through the hot, airless jungle; then the trees became fewer as they began an ascent of the sloping side of the mountain.

"How much further?" Deveer grunted to Kato.

"We still have quite a ways to go," Kato said. He glanced at the sun which was sinking behind one of Mount Kellar's jagged peaks. "Another hour, perhaps."

The path they followed now was a narrow gash leading into the mountain. On either side of them sheer cliffs shot cleanly above them; at the top a tiny patch of white sky was visible. The cliffs cut off the last of the sun and they walked through an atmosphere that was like purple shadow.

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Finally after an hour's march the path turned sharply and the Americans saw a rocky plateau ahead of them. Formed by the ruptured base of Mount Kellar, it was roughly square and covered approximately two or three acres.

Kato led the party along the left side of the plateau. It was almost dark now and Deveer saw ahead a bright light burning in the darkness.

"We are about at the end of our journey," Kato said. He didn't seem tired. His voice was still light, faintly amused and his stride was springy.

When they reached the light they discovered it was an electric bulb set above a tunnel that led into the bowels of the mountain. A sentry at the mouth of the tunnel came to attention and saluted the lieutenant.

Kato returned the salute and said something to his men which was obviously a command of dismissal because they broke ranks and moved away in the darkness.

"We will go inside," Kato said. "I imagine you're tired and would appreciate a wash. Well, we'll take care of that first. Just follow me."

He walked into the tunnel, Deveer and Peter following. Inside, the tunnel was illuminated with electric lights set into the wall at intervals of twenty or twenty-five feet. The walls of the tunnel were smoothly hewn and covered with concrete. The floor had been finished in the same manner.

"Quite a set-up," Deveer said.

Kato smiled. "We have been busy," he said.

THE tunnel was about ten yards wide with a high ceiling. Every thirty or forty yards a uniformed sentry was posted. The sentries resembled the men who had escorted them through the jungle, except that they seemed neater and cleaner. But their faces had the same blank, impassive stare and their reactions were jerky and automatic.

Kato stopped at a sliding door beside which there was a row of buttons. He pressed the bottom button and then turned and smiled at the Americans.

"The elevator will be along shortly. I'm glad you're impressed with our industry. We haven't had much to work with and it's gratifying to know you are impressed."

"We're impressed," Deveer said dryly.

The elevator arrived and the door slid open noiselessly. They entered, Kato pushed another button and the elevator began a swift ascent. The interior of the elevator was fitted with gleaming steel and brown wood paneling. The Americans looked at the modern appointments with interest. They were as incongruous in the surroundings as a python would have been on Forty-second and Broadway.

After a ride of several minutes the car stopped and Kato led them down a brightly lighted corridor to a double room, equipped with cots and a lavatory.

"I'll leave you now," he said. "When you're refreshed I'll be back."

He smiled and left.

Deveer kicked the door shut and looked at Peter. "Quite a deal," he said. "What do you think?"

Peter shook his head warningly and made a quick tour of the rooms. He probed the mattresses, looked under the chairs and inspected the ceiling.

"Dictaphone?" Deveer asked.

"That's what I was looking for," Peter said. "If they can build elevators in a rock mountain, a dictaphone wouldn't be too much for them. But I don't see any."

Deveer sat down and lit a cigarette. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and

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then shrugged. "No use guessing what goes. Better just wait and see."

"I'm wondering about Rick and the girl," Peter said.

"Maybe they've been picked up, too."

There was a knock on the door a moment later and a Japanese entered carrying a tray. There was hot tea and a plate of small cakes made with gray flour. Deveer bit into one and chewed experimentally. Then he nodded.

"Tastes all right," he said.

"You're pretty cool," Peter said with a faint smile.

"Nothing much to get excited about yet," Deveer said. "They're treating us all right. If they give us trouble that'll be the time to think about doing something. Right now I'm going to eat. Then I'm going to wash some of this dirt off. After that I'll just sit and wait."

Kato was back in an hour. He had changed to a clean uniform and was all smiles.

"I hope you're feeling better," he said. "Now, will you come along, please?"

The two men followed him to the elevator and they rode upward for what seemed to be several minutes. When the car stopped Kato took them down a lighted, paneled corridor to an oaken door, which was standing about six inches ajar.

He knocked twice and a voice from beyond the door said come in. Kato pushed open the door and nodded to the Americans to follow him.

INSIDE the room, which was about thirty feet square, there were several chairs and a huge desk. Behind the desk sat an elderly Japanese.

"Professor Matsubi, these are the Americans," Kato said. He smiled like a child who expects to be complimented; then he bobbed his head in a nervous little bow and left the room.

Matsubi was small and wiry, with close cropped white hair, seamed yellowed skin, and eyes that were like small bright buttons. He smiled suddenly showing uneven, dicolored teeth.

"Sit down," he said, in a mild voice which had the suggestion of a lisp. "I am happy to talk with you and see you."

Deveer and Peter sat down in straight-backed chairs facing the desk. The flooring under them was of polished, close grained wood; three walls were covered with maps and graphs, but the wall behind Matsubi was completely bare. The room was comfortably warm and it had the look of a place that had been used for a long time.

Matsubi hooked his fingers into the lapels of the shiny black coat he wore and settled back in his chair. He smiled companionably.

"Now you look more comfortable," he said. "Tell me, are you surprised to find yourselves here?"

Deveer glanced sideways at Peter, then shrugged and looked at Matsubi. "I guess we are. We weren't looking for anything like this."

"Quite so. Tell me, what were you looking for?"

"A landing field," Deveer said. This was the ostensible reason given for their trip in Washington. "An American airline is looking for safety landing fields in this area. You know, alternate spots to set down in case the scheduled field is weathered in."

Matsubi looked at him and continued to smile. "You didn't expect to find anything like this, eh?"

"No."

"I have been afraid for the past months that someone might come looking for us," Matsubi said, moving his

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hands in an embarrassed flutter. "That would be awkward. We lead a nice secluded life and the thought of interruption isn't pleasant. You see we've been here for quite a few years now. We like it because we can continue our work in private."

"What kind of work?" Peter asked.

"Oh, experimentation of various sorts," Matsubi said. "Nothing very interesting to a lay person, I'm afraid." He blinked owlishly. "But we haven't introduced ourselves yet. I am, as you know from what Kato said, Professor Matsubi. And you—?" he left the question hang in the air.

"My name is Deveer. This is Peter Rundell," Deveer said.

"So charmed," Matsubi said. He picked up a pen from his desk and toyed with it idly. When he looked at them again the smile was gone.

"I know you gentlemen are lying," he said. "I know you are officers in the American army. I want to know why you have lied to me. I want to know if you were sent here by your government looking for me and my little sanctuary. I want to know all that you know, gentlemen. And I think it is time you begin to tell me these things I wish to know."

PETER glanced at Deveer, then shook his head. "You're way ahead of us, Professor. We're charting emergency landing fields for an American airline. That's the straight dope."

"We are sensible men," Matsubi said. "There is no point to be gained in wasting time this way." He stood up and came around the desk, toying idly with the pencil in his hand. "I know you have information I need. I would not like to resort to force to make you talk. Perhaps I can avoid that by telling you a little story. This story may scare you and make you willing to cooperate. I know you are not children to be scared by fables, but remember, gentlemen, this is not a fable. It is true and it is not pretty.

"Once upon a time," he said, with a little smile, "there was a young man in the service of the Emperor, a major in the army. He was a sincere, hard working young man and he believed implicitly in the cause of the Emperor. This young man, whose name was Major Kok, was finally sent to school to learn things about atomic energy. He proved to be an apt pupil and he soon developed into a fine scientist. Strangely, his special talent lay in destructive techniques. I am an amateur psychiatrist, not a specialist, you understand, and it seemed to my amateur insight that the young man suffered from some inadequacy within himself, which he found justified by destruction. This isn't an original perception, but it has perhaps the virtue of being accurate. I have found this type of abberation quite common. The bully, for instance, is usually a graceless lout who has no personal qualities that command social acceptance; so he gains a recognition of some sort by brute force. He pushes everyone around so that they will be forced to look at him. This, for him, is the only attention he can command, so it must suffice. The sadist is usually sexually inadequate. Unable to have a woman in the normal sense of the word he is conscious of shame. This shame eventually takes the form of hatred. Hatred against the object that he cannot please or satisfy. This hatred is released by inflicting pain on the hate object."

Matsubi paused apologetically. "I'm afraid I digress. Anyway, to come back to Major Kok. He was hard working and talented, but his talent lay in destruction. One day Major Kok was sent to the town of Hiroshima, late in

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nineteen forty-five. He was there when the Atom bomb was dropped on the city. Major Kok was found several days later and he was in serious shape. One of his eyeballs had literally melted and run down his cheek. One arm was burned off the elbow and his whole body looked as if it had been turned for hours on a spit above hot coals. He suffered a great deal, I imagine, since he lay in the wreckage of a home for several days before he was found. Major Kok didn't lose consciousness. He remained conscious all that while and he thought considerably about the things that happened to him and who had done them to him.

"When Major Kok was released from the hospital the war was over. He was a travesty of a human being and since he had once been quite handsome this almost drove him insane. I was instrumental in having him brought here. That took considerable ingenuity but I won't bore you with those details. I did what I could for Major Kok but he had become quite a hopeless case. His delight in destruction, which had resulted from some feeling of insecurity or inadequacy, had become a raging flame that was literally maniacal. He lived for vengeance, but only for a specific kind. He wanted to inflict on his enemies the same pain he had suffered. I worked with him tirelessly for months but it was hopeless. He was becoming more and more dangerously unstable so I was forced to have him locked away before he harmed himself or one of us. I made him a prisoner, but to prevent his getting any worse I let him use a laboratory and continue his experiments. His experiments, gentlemen, men, are horribly unpleasant. He has done things to occasional rats and birds which would make your mind stagger with loathing. But perhaps I have said enough of Major Kok.

"We will come back to you. I need the information you have. Unless I get it quickly I will give Major Kok the great satisfaction of a live subject to work on. Now," Matsubi paused and smiled again. "Has my little story frightened you? Will you save us all such an unpleasant prospect and tell me what I must know? Or are you unmoved?"

PETER glanced down and saw that the backs of his hands were sweating. He swallowed hard.

"I don't know anything you'd want to know," he said stubbornly.

Matsubi smiled dreamily at the ceiling. "When I tell Major Kok you are Americans he will be insane with delight. Perhaps it's unkind of me to deny him such joy after all. The Major has suffered greatly at your hands, gentlemen. Maybe I am being too humane. Perhaps the major's maniacal urges are normal and my forebearance abnormal. I am an amateur psychiatrist and I could easily be wrong. But I have a horror of violence. I wish to prevent suffering if possible. Won't you reconsider?"

Deveer looked at the back of his nails and said nothing. His square stubborn face was white. Peter stood up suddenly and his chair crashed to the floor. The light in his eye was fanatic.

"Do whatever the hell you want to," he yelled. "I haven't got anything to say."

"We will see," Matsubi said quietly.

He pushed a button on his desk and the door opened immediately. Kato stood there with three soldiers at his back. "What is it, Professor?" he asked blandly.

Matsubi nodded at Peter. "This young man is anxious to meet Major Kok. See that he is not disappointed.

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Leave him there but see that the major's enthusiasm doesn't carry him away. That is all."

Kato closed in on Peter's side, one hand on the gun at his belt. The three soldiers moved quickly around him, cutting off any futile hope for a break.

"Come along," Kato said.

Peter flashed a look at Deveer. "Don't worry about me. They won't get anything. We'll stick this out."

He was hurried across the room and the door slammed behind him. Deveer hadn't moved; he still sat looking at the backs of his nails, lips clamped tightly together.

Matsubi walked around and sat down behind his desk.

"You've had nothing to say," he commented.

"No point in talking," Deveer said. "You've got all the high cards."

"Oh, yes," Matsubi smiled. "That is what you say in the games of cards you play."

"That's right. When you've got low cards you don't do much talking. You wait until you get some high cards yourself."

"Do you think that will happen?"

"It's happened before."

"Do you think it can happen now?"

Deveer took out his cigarettes and crossed his legs. He looked directly into Matsubi's face. "Yes, I think so," he said.

"Where will you get them?" Matsubi's voice was politely puzzled.

"From you."

MATSUBI laughed, a strangely shrill laugh. "You are so humorous," he said.

"Think so?" Deveer stood up and flicked ashes on the floor. "That kid you took out of here is a baby. He doesn't know the score when it's staring him in the face. Maybe he'll talk but he won't tell you anything you don't know right now. The thing you have to know he doesn't know. And you don't even have an idea of what the one important thing is that you've got to know. How do my cards look now, Matsubi? I think they're changing spots. I think they're getting higher."

"Do you want to go on?" Matsubi asked gently.

"Sure. There's one thing you've got to know. And that's how to keep the good old U.S. from coming after us. And unless you keep them from coming they'll be here with an airborne army pretty quick. You know what else they'll bring? Little eggs like they dropped on Hiroshima. B-29's with bellies full of four thousand pound bombs. Flame throwers and cork screws and blow-torches to dig you out of this rat hole. That won't make you happy."

"Do you know what would keep all that from happening?"

"No." Deveer laughed. "How does that sound? You can't pull it out of me because I don't know."

"Why are you telling me this then?" Matsubi said.

Deveer put his cigarette out on the floor and put his hands on Matsubi's desk. He leaned forward and smiled without any humor. "Because I think we can make a deal."

Matsubi pursed his lips and began to nod his head. "I see," he said softly. "I see."

"How about it?"

"You're cards aren't that high. I want details."

"Okay. We're on an army mission to find you, Matsubi. That we've done. Our next order was to report immediately if we did find any Japs in this area. If we don't report they'll know something's wrong, and they'll come in after us."

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"Then you should report right away."

"That's it."

"You should report that you didn't find us. Is that what you mean?"

"That's it. But all radio contact must be by code. And there's a code signature that only Rick Mason knows."

"Rick Mason? Who is he?"

"He's the man in charge. If I sent the message without the code signature they'd know something was wrong. He has to send it."

"Maybe we should find Rick Mason and send him to talk with Major Kok."

"No good. You could kill Rick Mason but he wouldn't talk. He's tough as whalebone."

"But to try is healthy," Matsubi said.

"There's an easier way. Pick up Mason and let me talk with him."

"Oh, I see. You would—"

"That's it," Deveer nodded. "And it won't be hard. Here's the pitch . . ."

CHAPTER IV

RICK stopped and glanced up at the sun. "How about a break?" he said to Clare Holloway. "We're only about fifteen minutes from the plane and we've made good time."

"Even with me along?" she asked.

"You've kept up," he said.

He sat down on a stump and put a cigarette between his dry lips. Taking off his cap he ran his hand over his face. The girl leaned against a tree and slapped irritably against a mosquito that settled on her ankle. She was hot and dirty. Brambles had scraped her legs, the sun had been like the touch of a hot knife after the first hour and every mosquito in Asia had apparently discovered that she was wearing shorts and an armless blouse.

"Damn!" she said bitterly, as one buzzed hungrily around her knees.

Rick lit his cigarette and kept his face straight.

"Don't be so noble," she said. "You're dying to say 'I told you so', aren't you? Why don't you, then? I'd like that better than your tolerant, forebearing silence."

"I told you so," he said mildly.

"Oh, you're impossible."

"Good logical point of view. Here, take a cigarette. The smoke may help a little."

"Thanks," she said sulkily.

He lit the cigarette for her and then dropped his own on the ground and crushed it with his heel.

"Let's be going," he said. "Peter and Deveer will beat us back if we don't shake it."

"Thanks for the smoke," she said. "Your idea of a ten minute break is two drags off a cigarette." She took two or three deep drags and blew the smoke along her arms. "Maybe that will help. But I'm sure cigarette smoke will turn out to be something mosquitoes here just love."

They hit the trail again and in shortly over fifteen minutes came to the edge of the plateau in which the plane had landed. The sun was dropping out of sight and its last rays coated the plane's wings with a silver burnish.

They walked through the stubble that grew in the plateau, covering the last hundred yards to the ship.

"I never saw anything so beautiful," Clare said tiredly.

When they reached the plane Clare climbed inside and Rick looked around. Obviously they were the first back. He checked his watch. The other two had been gone well over two hours.

He climbed inside the ship then and broke out canned meat, coffee and an

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electric stove. While he was setting the stove up to operate off the ship's batteries Clare joined him. She was wearing slacks and white shirt with sleeves. She hadn't washed her face but she looked surprisingly good.

"The floor show is over," she said. "The flora and fauna of this area have seen the last of my charms. I'm going to dress like a cocoon until we get out. I was pretty much of a pain in the neck, wasn't I?"

"Pretty much," he said, watching the coffee simmer.

"You make apologies so easy," she said, dryly. "What I'm trying to say is I've been acting like a spoiled brat, which is just what I am."

"Okay," he said, "Let's start all over. Get a can of biscuit and some mustard out of stock."

THEY had sandwiches and coffee sitting at the edge of the hatch watching the night crowding down on them with incredible swiftness. With the night came a cold damp wind.

"You're worried, aren't you?" she said.

He nodded slowly. "Peter and Deveer should have been back by now. I don't like the idea of trying to hunt them up. I'd probably get lost myself."

"Couldn't we set off a flare?"

"We could. I've been thinking about it. It's a pretty garish way of advertising that we're here."

"Is there anyone else in this neck of the woods?"

"I don't know."

The darkness was complete now. A few stars were breaking through the black curtain of sky but their shine was not illuminating.

"Get a bedroll," Rick said suddenly. "We're going to pitch a camp away from the plane. If anyone comes snooping around I don't want to be where they expect me."

She hesitated a moment as if about to ask a question. Then she said, "Right away," and went inside the dark plane. Rick took the forty-five from his holster and checked its action. He was worried now. Fighting shadows was a quick way to wear out and accomplish nothing.

Clare was back in a moment or two. "I brought yours, too."

"Thanks."

They walked a hundred yards from the plane until Rick stumbled across a shallow depression. He explored around and found that it was about a foot deep and ten feet square.

"This will do," he said. "If there's starlight we can see the silhouette of the plane. And we'll be hard to see."

Clare dropped a bedroll on the ground and sat on top of it.

"Do I have to turn in?" she asked.

"No. I'm going to sit up for a while and wait for Peter and Deveer. They may be along yet."

He made a pillow of his bedroll and propped it against one side of the depression. He settled his back against it and stretched his legs out. For an hour they sat without talking.

Then Clare said: "Can I sit close to you? I'm no softy but this is creepy."

"Sure."

She draped her roll beside him and sat with him. She was close enough so their arms touched.

"What do you think happened to them?" she asked.

"Could be a number of things. One of them might have sprained an ankle. They might be lost."

The night got colder and a whipping wind made scurrying sounds through the stubble. The stars were pale and lonely in the sky.

Clare thrust her feet into the opening of her sleeping bag, then wormed

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herself into its depths. "I'm not deserting you," she said. "But I'm frozen."

"You'll be asleep in ten minutes."

"I will not."

SHE was asleep in five. He listened to her regular breathing for a moment or two, then settled himself down more comfortably. He was worried. He didn't like the absence of Peter and Deveer. He didn't intend to sleep, but the long hours in the plane and the afternoon's hike had tired him. He yawned once or twice and he felt his lids getting heavier. He roused himself but it did no good. In a few minutes he was as sleepy as ever.

Finally he dozed off . . . .

He never knew what wakened him.

A footfall, a sharp breath, perhaps a sudden cold wind against his cheek. One moment he was sleeping; the next instant he was awake, his senses alert and tense. The night was still; at his side he could hear the girl's even breathing. He lay motionless until his eyes adjusted to the night. Then he found the butt of his forty-five with his right hand and got slowly to his feet.

There was a noise behind him. A shod foot scraping on stone. A human noise. He wheeled, crouching as he turned, but he was too late. A dim figure hurtled toward him landing on his back. From around the shallow depression other figures materialized.

There was no noise, no outcry. Just the rush of their feet, hoarse panting breath. The figure on his back had locked one arm about Rick's throat. The other hand gripped Rick's gun hand with steel strength.

Rick shook furiously in an attempt to get the gun free before the other attackers reached him. But he didn't have a chance. A wave of human flesh poured over him, knocking him to his knees.

He heard the girl cry out. She screamed his name once and her voice choked off. Something hard hit Rick at the base of his skull and he felt himself sinking down. For a minute everything was unbearably bright; then it was completely black.

CHAPTER V

RICK came around slowly. The first thing he saw was a low concrete ceiling above his head. He was lying on his back, head resting on a coarse pillow. His head hurt. His tongue felt thick and furry. He closed his eyes again and the pain in his head got worse.

"Feeling pretty bad?"

The voice came from somewhere on his left. It was a voice he'd heard before, but he couldn't remember where. His head hurt when he tried to remember.

"Feeling like hell," he said, because he had been asked a question and he had been brought strictly about things like that.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with you. You'll be okay after a while. How about a cup of hot tea?"

Rick opened his eyes then and rolled his head to the left. Deveer was sitting on a cot watching him. Deveer's hard square face was sympathetic in a mild sort of way.

"Tea sounds swell," he said.

Deveer took a tin cup from a tray at his elbow and poured tea for from a kettle. The tea was steaming hot and it smelled good. Rick tried getting up on one elbow and it worked all right. He took the cup and drank a little of the tea. It brought him back to life. He started feeling things again. That wasn't too good because everything he felt hurt like hell. He remembered the attack in the night, the swarm of men,

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the sapping he'd taken. And he remembered the girl's frantic scream.

"Okay," he said to Deveer. "It's okay." He swung his legs to the floor and sat up. He was in a room about twenty feet square. There were two cots, a basin, some moldy looking matting on the floor. The one door was of heavy wood and looked stout and durable. He looked at Deveer. "Let's have the whole story."

"This is a Jap supper club," Deveer said. "They picked up Pete and me last night. They believed our story about looking for a good landing field for an American airline. Then they picked you and the girl up."

"Where is she?" Rick said.

"They're taking good care of her," Deveer said.

"They didn't exactly pick us up," Rick said dryly. "They were pretty drastic about it. Are you sure she's okay?"

"Yes, she's fine. They're sorry about roughing you up. But I guess you're not interested in their apologies."

"How did they get you and Peter? Let me have the whole deal."

Deveer lit a cigarette and tossed the match carelessly on the floor. "We just ran into a party of Japs headed by a smooth cookie who calls himself Lieutenant Kato. He brought us here and we met a guy named Matsubi who seemed to be the big boss.

"Matsubi wanted to know what we were doing here and I gave him the story about looking for alternate landing fields. He seemed to believe me. After that I asked him if we could use his wireless. He said sure."

Rick put his tin cup down slowly. "He'll let us wire the States?"

"He didn't make any objections. I told him we didn't like the area, wasn't suitable for our purposes. That seemed to please him."

"Where's Peter now?"

"He's around somewhere. He hurt his hand and Matsubi sent him down to the dispensary. He should be back pretty soon."

Rick got up and looked around the room.

"Something about this deal isn't Kosher. How about a dictaphone in here?"

"I looked around. I didn't find anything."

Rick sat down again and put a cigarette in his mouth. He lit it and stared frowning at the floor.

"This sounds like the place we were sent to find. But I can't get the pitch about their letting us use the wireless."

"Matsubi doesn't seem suspicious," Deveer said. "I would have sent a message myself and not taken any chances, but I didn't have the code signature."

"That's right," Rick said. "I'd like to meet Matsubi. How do we arrange that?"

"No trouble," Deveer grinned. "We'll just walk down and drop in on him."

"Have they given you all the freedom you want?"

"They haven't bothered us yet. They seem pleasant and cooperative."

Rick got up and dropped his cigarette to the floor, stepped on it.

"Let's go see Matsubi," Rick said.

MATSUBI greeted him with a smile. Rick saw a fragile, elderly Japanese with close-cropped white hair, discolored teeth and brown wrinkled chin. He glanced about Matsubi's office, surprised at its comfortable well-used appearance.

Matsubi came around his desk smiling.

"It gives me pleasure to welcome you," he said. "My men were rough with you. I apologize. They said they were frightened when you began to

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fight."

"Yes," Rick said dryly. "They were so frightened they jumped me from the back."

"I am deeply sorry," Matsubi said, with a slight bow of his head.

"I can forget about it," Rick said. "I want to know about the girl."

"She is resting. Your comrade, Mister Rundell, I believe, is also in good condition."

Deveer glanced at Rick. "Let's get the wireless deal straightened out. We can't use this terrain for anything, so let's get out of here."

"You may use our wireless facilities immediately if you like," Matsubi said.

Rick hesitated. There was something wrong with the deal. This was a Jap stronghold. They had scientific equipment, a perfect hideout. Why should they be willing to cooperate with them? He glanced at Deveer and shrugged.

"I'll get the message ready right away," he said.

Matsubi handed him a pad and pencil. "For your composition," he grinned.

"You go ahead, Rick," Deveer said.

When the door closed behind Rick, Matsubi seated himself and put the tips of his fingers together carefully. "He looks quite intelligent," he said musingly.

"Is the wireless ready?" Deveer asked.

"Yes. He will suspect nothing. The set will appear to be operating normally. We have cut the voltage, however, so that the signal won't carry more than a mile. Our receiver will pick up the message and the code signature."

"Then?" Deveer said.

"Then?" Mutsubi smiled dreamily. "I will send a message to your Government. It will be a fine message. It will have Major Rick Mason's signature attached to it. I don't think I will have any more interference after that."

He looked thoughtfully at the top of his desk and then he glanced at Deveer.

"That is what you planned, eh?"

"That's it," Deveer said. "Maybe after that you'll tell me what kind of place this is and what your plans are."

Matsubi continued to smile. "Maybe," he said quietly.

Rick spent a half hour writing his message. He sat on the cot with the pad on his knee and tried to get it right; but he couldn't shake the feeling that everything was wrong. Wrong as hell.

Finally he tossed the pad aside and got to his feet. He was in the room in which he had come to; a small, rock-walled room with two cots and a lavatory. He paced up and down a while scratching his chin.

Suddenly he turned and walked to the door. He tried the knob and it turned in his hand. He hadn't been sure that it wasn't locked. The door came open and he stepped into the corridor. To his left the rock-walled hall led to the elevator which had carried him up to Matsubi's office.

To his right the corridor led straight to a door almost a hundred yards away; in front of this door an armed sentry was standing guard.

RICK stood for a moment frowning. Upstairs Deveer was talking to Matsubi. Somewhere else in this weird city within a mountain Peter and Clare Holloway were being taken care of. Peter, Deveer had said, had hurt himself and had been taken to the dispensary. The girl, he'd said, was all right.

Rick wondered about that. He wanted the girl to be all right. He knew he'd been thinking about her all the time and that surprised him. They'd fought all the time they'd been together; there had seemed to be an inevitable

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antagonism between them. Still he was worried about her now.

He turned right and walked slowly down the corridor toward the guard. He'd decided to find out more of what was going on before he sent his wireless.

The guard paid no attention as he approached. He remained at attention, his back to the door he was guarding. Rick stopped in front of him.

"What's in there?" he asked.

The guard shook his head. "You must go no further," he said, in good, but accented English.

Rick shrugged and took out his cigarettes. The corridor formed an L at this spot with another narrow hallway that extended straight for about a hundred yards. There was no apparent door at the end of this corridor; it was a cul de sac.

He offered the guard a cigarette but it was refused with a single shake of the head. Rick lit his and dropped the match on the floor. The guard paid no attention to him. His eyes seemed fixed on a spot several inches above Rick's head and they remained there unwinkingly.

There was no animosity evident in the guard's attitude. He was a short, stockily built man and he seemed indifferent to Rick. Rick was turning away with the intention of returning to his room when he heard a low groan that seemed to come from beyond the door.

He urned back as the groan was repeated a second time.

"What's that?" he asked the guard.

"You must go no further," the guard repeated.

Rick hesitated a second, then moved forward. The guard brought his rifle to port arms and thrust it flat against Rick's chest.

"You must go no further."

"Who's in there?"

"You must go no further."

Obviously it was all the guard knew. The groan was repeated again and this time Rick went into action. He brought his knee viciously up into the guard's groin. When the man doubled forward he grabbed the rifle and wrenched it from his hands. The guard stared stupidly at his empty hands, then drove forward in an attempt to wrap his arms about Rick's body. Rick stuck a left into his face, straightening him up; then he swing his right fist down in an ax-like chopping blow.

THE guard staggered back and Rick hit him again. This time he went down in a senseless heap. He stepped over the man's body and tried the door. It opened and he stepped cautiously into a darkened room. From a corner he heard a low moan. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a paper of matches and struck one.

The brief flickering illumination revealed a room about ten feet square; a dank, damp hole with rock walls and a smell of moldy straw.

Lying in a corner on a filthy matting was Peter Rundell. The light flickering and went out then, but Rick had seen enough to send a cascading chill of horror down his back.

He dropped to his knees beside him and felt in the dark for his face; it was burning hot to his touch.

"Peter!" he said. "Can you hear me?"

"Who is it?" The voice was a whisper.

"Rick. What in the name of god has happened to you?"

"I didn't tell, Rick. I didn't tell them anything. They tried to make me. Major Kok tried, Rick. He's a devil, Rick. But I didn't talk."

"All right," Rick said gently.

He struck another match. Peter was

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lying on his back. His shirt had been removed and the skin of his chest and shoulders had been horribly burned. It looked as if each inch of his torso had been exposed to a branding iron.

The light went out and Rick's hands were shaking so badly he couldn't strike another. The rage in him was hot and deadly.

"Who did this, Peter?"

"Major Kok. He's twisted and horrible, Rick. Keep away from him. Matsubi gave me to him to play with."

It took Rick a moment to understand. And it was too horribly clear. Deveer had sold out. Matsubi had tortured Peter for information. Deveer had lied. Had said Peter had been to a dispensary. Matsubi and Deveer were working together. He wondered then about the girl. Deveer had said she was all right. Had he lied about that? Was Clare now in some dark room like this, burned and tortured to the point of insanity?

"Peter," Rick said. "Can you get up? Do you think you could walk?"

"I might. I'm—I'm not hurt inside. That devil is too smart for that. He wants me back tomorrow for another session."

"I'm going to get you out. Where can I lift you without hurting?"

"My back is all right. He's saving that for tomorrow. Then he's got other ideas. God, don't let me live, Rick. Kill me before I go back to him."

"You're not going back to him."

He moved a hand carefully under Pet's back and helped him slowly to his feet.

"Are your eyes all right?"

"Yes, I can see."

RICK led him to the doorway, into the corridor. The guard was still unconscious. Rick bent and unbuckled a revolver and belt from his waist. He strapped it around his middle and picked up the rifle. He had no idea of what to do. They were outnumbered by the hundreds. He didn't know the way out. But he was going to get Deveer, for one hing, if he was killed trying. And if his luck was good he'd save a shot for Matsubi and one for this Major Kok. There was the girl, too, but he didn't know where she was. He didn't know anything.

He was straightening up from the guard's body when he heard a shout. Looking down the main corridor he saw a single Jap signaling frantically. The Jap started to run toward him, tugging at the revolver at his hip. Rick snapped the rifle to his shoulder. He let the Jap shoot twice, heard the bullets flatten themselves with a *ping!* against the wall. Then he fired once and the Jap went down in a sprawling tangle.

From the connecting corridor a squad of Japs appeared. A shout went up when they saw the Americans. At the head of the main corridor another squad appeared.

Both corridors were cut off. The only avenue left led to a blank wall a hundred yards away.

"Move ahead of me," Rick ordered Peter.

Peter obeyed, stumbling toward the *cul de sac*. Rick backed after him. He fired twice and the Jap squad flattened itself on the floor and began sniping. Rick dropped to one knee and aimed at the infrequent light. He picked off four of them, plunging the corridors into darkness. The rifle clicked then on an open breech. The gun was empty. He tossed it aside and ran down the corridor after Peter. Behind him he could hear the Japs following cautiously.

He hissed. Peter?"

"Here, Rick."

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The voice was a few yards behind him. He turned and moved quickly toward Peter. His outstretched hand touched the other's arm.

"This is the end of the line," Peter said. "This is a solid wall. I can't find any opening."

Rick took the revolver from his holster and moved around Peter until his back was flat against the wall. Down the dark corridor he could hear the stealthy approach of the Japs. An occasional hissed word, a foot scraping against rock, told him the Japs were closing in cautiously.

"Crouch down," he whispered to Peter. "No sense giving them a king-sized target."

He dropped to his knees and Peter came down beside him.

A shot sounded and a bullet smacked into the rock above their head. Splintered shale cascaded onto their shoulders. Another shot sounded; the Japs were fifty yards away now and by their excited whisperings Rick knew they were gathering for a charge. He held the gun ready in his hand. When the Japs came for them he'd get as many as he could. That was all he could hope for.

There was no more firing. The whispering of the Japs had died away. The silence was immense and tomb-like. Rick knew the Japs were ready. He touched Peter gently.

"Any second now," he whispered. "Take it easy, kid."

"Okay, Rick. I'll try."

SUDDENLY the silence was shattered by a shrieking *Banzai!* yell; shouted by one man, then taken up in frenzy by dozens of others. The sporadic firing began. Then they heard a rush of feet.

Rick fired twice and heard the sound of a scream and then a body sprawling to the ground.

Suddenly Peter grabbed his arm.

"Rick! There's an opening here in the wall. I leaned against it and it opened."

Rick heard the words but for an instant they made no sense. Then he scrambled around Peter, feeling the hard surface of the wall with his hands.

Yes! Here it was, an opening! A section of the wall had swung away leaving a four feet gap. He grabbed Peter by the arm.

"In you go!"

He snapped two more shots down the corridor at the onrushing Japs. He heard another scream and the rush of footsteps faltered and stopped. The firing began again. Luckily the Japs were firing high.

Peter disappeared into the opening. Rick fired one more shot, then lunged in after him. He gripped an edge of the swinging wall section and shoved it back into place. He fumbled about with his hands looking for a lock; but the section was perfectly smooth.

He found Peter with his hand.

"Are you all right?"

"Y—Yes, I'm okay. Hadn't we better get moving?"

"Yes." Rick stood up carefully and stretched his arms around. They encountered nothing. They were in a room of some kind, a place that was cold, damp and drafty. The draft was encouraging. They weren't blocked in.

He fumbled through his pocket for a match. He was ready to strike it when a flame flared in the darkness several feet away. Holding the light was a man; a scrawny man with white hair and a brown-seamed face.

The man touched the light to a candle in his right hand. Illumination spread in a weak circle about him. Rick jerked his gun around to cover this strange apparition.

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The man saw the gesture and shook his head slowly.

"I am a friend," he said. "You need not fear me."

He was short, barely over five feet tall and he wore a single garment of white linen that stretched from his neck to his ankles. He was old, incredibly old. His skin was lined and weathered, his blue eyes were coated with a rheumy film.

Rick saw that they were in a room that had been roughly hewn from solid rock. It was about ten feet square and on his right there was the black mouth of a small tunnel through which a draft of cool damp air was blowing.

"Who are you?" Rick said.

"I am called Lento," the strange figure answered. "My ancestors were Llamas. We have been here through many ages, but I am one of the last of my race. The others who live in the mountain have destroyed everyone else, I think. I am the last. I heard the noise of their weapons and I knew you were in trouble. I opened the wall to save you from them. But who are you?"

"AMERICANS," Rick said. He didn't know whether to believe the old man or not, and he didn't see whether it made much difference one way or the other. For the minute he and Peter were out of danger. That was the important thing. But how long they would keep this freedom was something else. Through the thickness of the wall he could hear faint voices. Chattering querilous voices. And the sound of milling feet. Obviously the Japs had completed their charge and were now perplexed at the disappearance of their quarry.

He inspected the closely fitting section of swinging wall, then glanced at the old man. "Is there anyway of locking that?" he asked.

"No. But it is difficult to see from the other side. They will not discover it."

Rick looked at Peter. "How're you feeling?"

"Okay," Peter said. His face was tight and drawn with pain but he managed a smile. "I feel like an overdone steak, but it's not too bad."

The old man moved to the mouth of the tunnel. "You had best follow me," he said. "There are recesses in the mountain where we will be safe."

Rick nodded and took Peter by the arm. The old man moved into the dark tunnel, his candle shedding frail light in a wavering circle about his feet. They went slowly for about fifty yards until they came to a double intersection. The left branch of the tunnel widened; the right branch narrowed.

The old man, Lento, indicated the left branch with a movement of his head. He looked suddenly frightened. "Down there," he said, nodding toward the right and speaking almost to himself, "is the cursed grotto of Lellamy. The sins of those before us can weigh heavily." He muttered this last with a slow shake of his head. Then: "But we must go."

He turned left but there was a sudden draft of cold air in the tunnel. Rick felt it on the back of his neck. It came from *behind* them.

The old man turned to them, his eyes wide and staring.

"They have found the door," he whispered.

There was another gust and the candle in his hand flickered wildly and went out, plunging them into a deep, terrifying darkness.

From behind them came the murmur of voices; then footsteps that were like the scurrying of rats.

"Follow me!" the old man cried.

A shot sounded! Rick felt a bullet

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fan past his cheek. The Japs were shooting blindly now, knowing the Americans were somewhere ahead. There was another shot and the ugly chatter of a machine gun.

"Hit the ground," Rick snapped. He went down and he felt Peter beside. "Okay?" he grunted.

"Still lucky," Peter said.

"Lento!" Rick hissed.

There was no answer. There was only the noise of the Japs behind them.

"Lento!"

The darkness was silent.

Rick touched Peter on the arm. "Let's go. He's taken off."

THEY got to their feet and went ahead, hands outstretched, feet touching the ground cautiously. Gradually the sound behind them faded. About them a faint light was gathering. They pressed on, hurrying now that they could see their way. The light was increasing, shedding radiance in an ever widening arc, but its source was a mystery. It seemed to flow from the walls and the floor and the ceiling.

The corridor widened gradually and as they went on the ceiling began to arch slowly. Soon they were hurrying through a vast cavernous hallway that was bathed in luminous brilliance. Ahead of them finally appeared massive doors. Worked with strange figures hewn from the solid rock, soaring to a height many feet above their eyes, the great doors stood before them, closed and silent.

They stopped and looked about them, wondering. They were in a spreading room, immense, lighted. Water seeping from the rock reflected light in grotesque patterns. There was silence about them and the strange brilliant light that seemed without source.

Peter took Rick's arm in fingers that tightened convulsively.

"Look!" he whispered.

The great figured doors were opening slowly.

CHAPTER VI

THEY went forward, entranced. The door swung back revealing a great misty cavern that was full of the strange misting light. Ahead of them a great urn was sunk in the rock floor; before it a black altar had been built.

The room stretched into infinity. Vapors swirled about like brilliant, varicolored clouds in the strange light. The walls were mists and the ceiling was a mass of tinted changing fog. Reality was confined to the few square feet about them. The sunken urn, the black altar and the rock ground under their feet.

Now they saw that the vapors were rising from the urn. A strange liquid bubbled angrily in the great sunken vase sending a column of pale smoke toward the vaulted ceiling.

"This is a dream," Peter said slowly. He looked around shaking his incredulously. "A living dream."

"I'm awake," Rick said tersely. "We've got things to do and I'm damned if I know where to start. I don't know where we are or how to get back to the Japs. But that's where we've got to go."

"I know," Peter said. He ran his hand over his forehead wearily. "They have an atom ray here. I learned that much. They did cause those plane crashes. Just experimenting. They'll be ready for more than that in a few months. We've got to stop them. They may make Deveer talk . . ."

"They won't have to," Rick said. "Deveer sold out. That's one reason we've got to get back. I want to see him again."

"How about the girl?"

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"I don't know what they've done with her."

"I'd pray to God they haven't sent her to Major Kok."

Rick felt sick and helpless. The thought of the girl in the hands of a twisted monster was enough to make him physically ill.

A creak behind them caused them to turn. The great figured doors were closing inexorably. Peter started for the narrowing opening but Rick shouted at him to stop. They watched the doors close shut, and the silence of the grotto seemed then to deepen.

"Why did you stop me? Peter asked.

"I don't know," Rick said. He was puzzled. He wanted to stay here in this great cavern for a while and he didn't know why.

He turned back to the sunken urn and the black altar. On top of the altar was a small black stone, perhaps an inch in diameter. He hadn't noticed it before since its color perfectly matched the background of the altar. He picked it up and turned it around in his fingers. There was deep red fire in its depths and the touch of its cold surface excited him strangely.

Peter looked at it and then glanced wistfully at the sunken urn. "Maybe I'm a fool," he said, spacing his words carefully, "but it seems I've always been looking for a place like this. I feel I've dreamt about it, or longed for it in some other life. That sounds pretty silly, doesn't it?" he said, grinning sheepishly at Rick.

"No sillier than a lot of things in the world."

Peter walked closer to the altar and stared at the bubbling liquid in the cauldron. "Isn't it odd we haven't asked each other what sort of a place this is? We just accept it. We don't ask why the altar is here and why the liquid in the vase is boiling. It just seems *right*.

"I'm sounding wild right now. You know, my brother was killed in the war and I wasn't in. I was too young. And I wanted desperately to be in it, too. After he was killed I felt that I had let him down. I felt if I had been in the war maybe he wouldn't have had to die."

"That's not very good logic," Rick said.

"I KNOW," Peter said. He smiled a little. "But it was the way I felt. I felt lonely when I knew he was dead. And I was lonely ever since. But now, while here I don't feel that way. It's like I've been cured of some disease."

"I don't get it," Rick said. "There is something I can't put my finger on. It's—"

Peter gestured suddenly with his arm. "Rick, *look!*"

Rick stared in the direction he was painting. In the direction of the great sunken urn. The column of pale smoke was changing hue, deepening to a violent scarlet. It was thickening too, pouring forth in a thick crimson stream, billowing toward the dim ceiling.

Through its mist a dim figure was forming!

A tall slim body was appearing magically in the crimson column of smoke. From the boiling liquid's vapor they saw a face materialize.

The face of a wondrously beautiful girl! Red hair flowed to bare shoulders in bright waves, green eyes flashed against the scarlet smoke.

Her slim, molded body was encased in shimmering gold; the slim feet that almost touched the fiery liquid were shod in thonged sandals. A diadem of blinding white light made a halo about her head. In her upraised hand was a long thin wand.

"I am Lellamy."

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They hadn't seen her lips move. Her head was thrown back, her green eyes stared upward to the immense vault of the ceiling. The voice filled the cavern. It rolled over them like far-away thunder. In its depths was pride and scorn and violence.

She raised both hands in the air and she seemed to be breathing deeply, exultingly. Her breasts lifted and she threw her head back in triumph. Under its shimmering golden sheath the muscles of her body writhed and stretched luxuriously, as if revelling in a sensuous, newly found freedom.

She looked down then and the green eyes flashed brilliantly. Peter was staring at her, stunned and dazed. Rick took one step backward, then halted. His jaw hardened and he snapped the revolver from its holster.

"I don't believe in miracles," he said. "There was never a ghost or an apparition that could stand a good dose of lead."

He raised the gun but the girl stiffened, and a blinding beam of light sprang from the tip of her wand. The beam hit his wrist, numbing his arm to the elbow. The gun clattered to the floor.

"What do you believe in now?" The voice again filled the cavern.

Rick massaged his wrist and for the first time in his life he felt fear. This was something he couldn't fight. Something that went against every concept of his thinking.

"I am Lellamy." The green eyes were fixed on Rick alone. "I can give you safety and freedom. I can give you things from your dreams. I can show you a world your imagination could never visualize. I can give you such happiness that your senses will reel and shudder in ecstacy. All this you may have if you love me. Love me and come to me."

SHE raised her arms again and the green eyes were veiling now and a maddeningly seductive smile played about her lips. She breathed deeply, filling her lungs in a self-induced rapture. She was desire incarnate. There was an invitation to passion in the undulation of her hips, in the exquisite formation of her body.

The golden sheath that was molded to her body was more stirring that complete. It revealed the slim, gently swelling thighs, the curving valleys of her hips, the high firm breasts. She was an instrument formed to gratify the frenzy of love, the ravishment of passion.

"Love me," she said, and smiled at him. "Do not leave me now. Stay and learn the enchantments of the grotto."

Rick caught Peter by the arm. "Back toward the door," he said in a harsh, unnatural voice. "This is the work of a devil. We've got a big job ahead of us. There are lives depending on us."

The voice of the girl rolled again like thunder.

"Stay with me. Stay with Lellamy in the grotto of love. I will give you raptures beyond the wildest dreams. Will you stay with me?"

Rick felt anger stirring. Anger at himself, anger at this devil's mirage. He knew it was ridiculous. He knew he was living some mad fantasy. To take it seriously was simply to make a fool of himself.

But he shook his head.

"No, I won't stay," he said.

There was a sudden wild music in his ears. The column of column vapor disappeared in a soft puff. The light in the cavern dimned, then flamed more brilliantly than ever.

When his eyes adjusted to the light the last of the smoke was fading. And standing before him, her back to the altar, was a slim red-haired girl with

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green eyes.

She was smiling.

CHAPTER VII

THE misty walls of the cavern receded; the column of smoke faded and the high rock ceiling came into relief. The light lost its strange brilliance; quiet settled over the grotto.

The girl continued to smile at Rick. She was just a girl, a slim beautiful red haired girl, but that was all. She was a flesh and blood creature.

"What kind of hocus pocus is this?" Rick asked her.

She came closer to him, still smiling. "I am Lellamy," she said. Her voice was no longer like far-off thunder. It was soft and sweet. "I was imprisoned here by my father many centuries ago. He was a very strange and powerful man. I disobeyed him one day. That was very serious. As punishment he confined me here forever, to dwell in the mists of the grotto. He was a devious, subtle man and he was not content with denying me the fields and the flowers I loved so dearly. He decreed that I must offer myself to all men who came here. The condition of my freedom was this; I would be released from this hateful bondage only when a man refused me."

She looked sadly down at her slim body. "That never happened, of course."

Rick didn't know whether to face the fact that he had gone insane, or to listen to her. He took a deep long breath and tried to steady his reeling mind.

"You were freed then, because I refused you?"

She nodded, but there was sadness in her face. "My father knew that might happen someday. With his curious streak of cruelty and hatred for me he planned against that, also. He provided that I should become the slave of the man who would refuse me. Thus my fate was to spend these centuries longing for a man who would not want me; even though I knew I would then become the slave of this man who despised me."

"I wasn't unappreciative," Rick said. He swallowed hard and tried to fight down the feeling that he was participating in a monstrous fantasy. "You're lovely and desirable. But I have things to do. There are enemies of ours here in the cave."

"You don't despise me, then?"

"Certainly not."

The girl smiled softly and sighed. From somewhere there came a chord of swelling music. It surrounded them, rising for a moment, then fading slowly until it melted into silence.

Peter looked at Rick, then at the girl. "What was that?"

She was smiling. "Who can tell? Maybe my first moment of happiness in centuries. Maybe, something else." She stretched her arms in the air, continuing to smile. "I think it is because I'm happy."

Rick thought of the American girl then, for no understandable reason. He remember the antagonism that flared between them; he remembred her courage and stamina. And he knew there was something about the girl that had got to him.

"If you've had one moment of happiness," he said bitterly to the red-haired Lellamy, "you're luckier than most of us."

"You are not happy, then?"

"I'm mad," Rick said. "I want to get my hands around a few necks and start squeezing. That'll do for happiness until something else comes along."

He shook his head then and glanced at the wand she held in her hands. He remember its numbing effect on his arm.

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"What kind of a weapon is that?" he asked her.

"Weapon?" She wrinkled her forehead. "It is merely a weapon to enforce my will. I didn't mean to hurt you. Had I wanted to hurt you it would have been different."

"Will you help us?" Rick demanded suddenly.

"I will do whatever you ask," she said simply. "I must obey you. But," she smiled and came still closer to him, "I would do what you ask whether I was your slave or not. I like you."

Rick stopped and picked up his revolver, replaced it in its holster. Lellamy was watching him expectantly. In his left hand he still held the black stone which he had removed from the altar.

"What is this?" he asked.

She sighed in disappointment. "That is the agent that materialized me. Keep it with you. It is very important."

He dropped it in his pocket and said, "We had better get started."

She sighed again. "Do you have nothing to say about the fact that I like you?"

"That isn't important," he said irritably. "There is a hell of lot to do and we can't get it done talking about who likes who."

"There is someone else?" she persisted.

"Yes," he said shortly. "There is someone else." He hadn't admitted it to himself until now. But he knew it was true. The American girl was what mattered.

"Is it she we are going to save?"

"Not alone her. There are others," Rick said.

"But she is the reason for your impatience?"

"Are you going to help or not?" Rick said bluntly.

"I must help," Lellamy said with a sad smile. "Follow me."

SHE led them toward the double doors. She raised the wand in her hand and the door swung open. They went through the vast cavernous hallway that led back toward the section of the caves in which Japs had set up their headquarters.

The corridor narrowed swiftly. Rick was walking with Peter. The girl was in the lead. Finally they came to the place where the corridors intersected.

"This is where we lost the old man," Rick said. "I wonder what happened to him."

"He probably got away," Peter said. "He knew his way around."

Lellamy turned. "Is this the way?"

She nodded down the dark corridor. This was the way Peter and Rick had made their escape from the *cul de sac.*

"This is it," Peter said.

"We'd better take it easy from here on," Rick said. He glanced at Lellamy. "Just how much of a wallop does that wand carry?"

She smiled confidently. "Enough, I think."

"Okay," Rick said. "We'll probably know in a little while."

They went carefully down the hall until they reached the place where the sliding section stood open. Rick dropped to his knees and cautiously crawled into the connecting corridor. The light had been repaired. A sentry stood on guard fifty yards away where three corridors met.

Rick took his gun from the holster and checked the ammunition. There were three rounds left in the clip. Not much. He crawled back, rejoined Lellamy and Peter.

"There's one sentry in sight," he said. "We can take care of him but I don't know what we'll run into then."

Lellamy smiled impishly at him.

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"You have no faith in Lellamy," she said.

She dropped to her knees in a graceful move and disappeared through the opening. Rick followed her quickly. He climbed to his feet in the lighted corridor. The girl was ten feet away, advancing toward the lone sentry. He turned and saw her and began shouting. He clawed at the gun at his hip.

Lellamy raised the wand and a blazing ray speared from its tip. The ray caught the Jap sentry across the forehead. He stiffened, a cry strangling in his throat. He glared wildly, sightlessly for a second, then sprawled forward on his face.

Lellamy turned and smiled at Rick.

"Simple, isn't it?"

"It's a good trick. But we're going to run into plenty of Japs before long."

Lellamy laughed. "They won't be any trouble. Tell, me, could this girl you are thinking of do that for you?"

"No," Rick said.

"Maybe you'll appreciate me more after I've done your work for you."

Peter came up beside them then. "Let's go," Rick said.

They walked to the intersection and started down the main corridor.

"Everything looks quiet," Rick said.

"Maybe it's too quiet," Peter said worriedly.

Ahead of them a sentry appeared. He had stepped from another corridor. He looked at them for a moment in comic bewilderment. Then he began shouting wildly.

Rick snapped a shot at him from his hip. The guard went down, clutching at his stomach.

"Fool!" Lellamy said, but she smiled. "You'll let them know we're here."

SHE was right. From a distance they heard a questioning shout. Then more voices added to the noise, and finally they heard the rush of heavy booted feet.

Around the corner spilled a squad of Japs. Short, ugly men with blank faces and the light of fanatic zeal in their eyes. Lellamy stepped back and raised her wand.

Rick dropped to one knee and fired another shot from his gun. The Jap in the lead went down with a cry of pain. Over Rick flashed Lellamy's ray, turning the corridor into a shaft of blazing light.

The squad of Japs stopped as if they'd struck an invisible stone wall. They rolled backward, weapons falling from nerveless hands. They made no outcry. It was inhuman. The men dropped to the floor in sagging heaps and the imprint of death was on their huddled postures.

Lellamy turned to Rick with a little bow.

"Do you appreciate me now?" she smiled. "What can this girl of yours have to match my power?"

"That's not the point," Rick said.

"Is she as beautiful as I?"

Rick looked at her with narrowed eyes. She squared her shoulders and smiled confidently at him. Her body was a poem of perfection. From her slim, delicate arched feet to the crowning glory of her hair she was magnificent.

"She's more beautiful," Rick said.

Lellamy flushed, then she smiled ruefully. "I will do then what I am fitted for. Let us look for more of your enemies."

They proceeded through the corridors and her wand was a blazing torch of death. The alarm had been sounded. Small bands of Japs appeared and were cut down instantly. Finally they came to double doors that were secured with a thick metal bar and lock.

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Lellamy raised her wand and the ray struck against the steel surface of the great doors. They melted in fiery radiance, crumbled and fell inward.

"This is what I am fitted for," Lellamy said bitterly. "To melt the heart of cold steel, but not the heart of man."

They walked forward through the sagging portals and came to a railed balcony that overlooked a vast cavern. Below them stretched a laboratory of intricate perfection.

Squat Japs worked beside machines which dwarfed them to pigmy proportions. Rows of shining turbines were throbbing with ear-shattering sound. Retorts and crucibles bubbled over huge burners and clouds of gas floated upward.

There were a hundred men working methodically with the instruments of science. The deafening noise of the operation made them oblivious to the intrusion of the Americans. Obviously the balcony was an observation post from which the work could be inspected.

"The atomic factory," Rick said.

"It must be," Peter said. "This is where they developed the ray that knocked those planes out of the air. This is the center of the web, apparently. From here they'll strike anywhere they like."

Rick looked at Lellamy. She seemed indifferent to the scene below.

"These are our enemies," he said to her. "They are enemies of all men."

"I WILL do what you wish," Lellamy said, with a shrug. "But man is always man's greatest enemy. Killing these will not help. Man has always been a perfectionist in the trade of warring against his fellow man. If that energy were spent constructively what worlds we could build."

She moved closer to the railing and raised the wand in her right hand.

"I obey your will," she murmured. "I want love and you give me missions of hate. That is the story of men."

She closed her eyes and Rick saw a tear on her cheek. The next instant his eyes were blinded with the violent blaze of the ray. Like a broad, incredibly vivid bolt of lightning the ray struck across the laboratory. Flame danced in its wake. Tiny streamers of fire that looked like tricklets of water. They rushed together forming an ever-widening pool of flame.

The pool widened, deepened, engulfed the laboratory. Above the failing noise of the turbines, over the roar of flame, the despairing anguished shrieks of the men could be heard.

It lasted a full minute, then Lellamy lowered her arm. The fiery pool began to evaporate, broke into smaller segments, split again into snake-like fingers that writhed, twisted and finally disappeared.

Rick wet his dry lips. He felt sick as he looked at the blackened laboratory. The men had perished at their machines. They were travestied figures, drawn into weird inhuman shapes by the contraction of seared ligaments. The turbines were silent and ruined, melted into grotesque shapes to match the posture of their silent masters.

They turned and went back through the sagging, melted doors. They walked a length of corridor to an intersection and were not challenged.

"I think we have them all," Peter said.

"There's Matsubi and Deveer," Rick said. "And the girl."

"Oh, yes," Lellamy said, "there is the girl."

Rick stopped and took a revolver from a fallen Jap.

"I'll handle Deveer and Matsubi myself," he said. "That's a job for a

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gun."

"We'd better go with you," Peter said.

"I'll handle it alone," Rick said tonelessly.

Lellamy shrugged. "Very well. We will look for more of your enemies in this region."

Rick nodded and walked toward the elevator.

CHAPTER VIII

HE GOT off at Matsubi's level. With the gun in his right hand he walked toward the door of the office. He waited a minute before the door, then tried the knob. It turned in his hand. He kicked it open and stepped into the room.

Matsubi and Deveer were standing in front of a huge lighted chart, their backs to him. On the chart was a replica of the scene he had just left, the blackened, blasted laboratory.

Deveer turned quickly at the sound of Rick's entrance. His hand started for his hip.

"Go ahead," Rick said coldly. "Go for it. I'll spot you another second then let you have it right in the guts."

Matsubi turned, his face a mask of rage.

"You have destroyed years of work, you madman," he said. His lips were flecked with foam and his eyes were gleaming with maniacal light. "Our laboratory was built with the lives of hundreds of men. And you have destroyed it in an instant."

"That's right," Rick said. He kicked the door shut behind him and put his back against it. "We've wiped out your rotten little nest, Matsubi." His eyes flicked to Deveer.

"You're worse than these rotten bastards," he said bitterly. "You threw Peter to the wolves to save your hide, then joined up with the idea of getting me out of the way. What do you think he'd have done to you after we were out of the way, you silly fool?"

Deveer's broad face was impassive. "I took a chance," he said without emotion. "I could have made a big guy out of myself. I could have done the pushing around for a change. It didn't turn out that way. Like everything else in my life. I grab for something and it looks good. When I get it in my hand it melts away to nothing. I'm not crying. Cut out the speeches and pull the trigger."

"The girl, first," Peter said. "Where is she?"

Matsubi licked his lips and then he smiled horribly.

"You aren't going to pull the trigger," he said, with a deliberate shake of his head. "I know where the girl is. If you kill me you'll never find her, believe me. Your position is an odd one, isn't it?"

"I can shoot you a few times for fun," Rick said. "That might make you talkative. Ever see a man with a bullet through his stomach? Or maybe the groin? I've had guys beg me to kill them just because they stopped one in the leg. Do you want me to try that?"

"I know of no way to stop you," Matsubi said. "You may shoot me as much as you like but it will not get you the girl. But I have a proposition. Do you want to listen?"

"Nothing is going to save you," Rick said.

"That is quite true," Matsubi said. "But I can hope for one small favor for telling you where the girl is."

"Spit it out," Rick said.

"All my life I have been a collector. My last obsession was with stones and jewels. You have in your pocket a black stone I would like to own for my last minutes on earth. Give me the stone and I will take you to the girl.

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After that I can only throw myself on your mercy."

"I have no mercy," Rick said.

"But you have the stone, eh?"

"How do you know I have it?"

Matsubi nodded toward the illuminated chart on the wall. "This interested development told me. I was able to follow your movements from the time you eluded my men. I saw you pick up the stone from the altar in the grotto. It is beautiful. I want to enjoy it for my last moments."

Rick took the stone from his pocket, glanced at it. It shone brilliantly. He tossed it up and down in his hand for a moment. He suspected a trick. But it was a chance he'd have to take if he wanted to see the American girl again. He tossed the stone to Matsubi.

The Japanese caught it and Rick swung his gun squarely on him. He was ready for anything, but Matsubi merely smiled delightedly at the stone, then dropped it into his pocket.

"I will keep my word. I will take you to the girl."

"Okay, walk ahead of me," Rick said, "You too, Deveer."

MATSUBI walked to the door and opened it. Deveer followed him into the corridor. "You have nothing to fear," Matsubi said. "My followers are dead. We are helpless. What do you propose to do with us?"

"I'm going to kill you both," Rick said harshly. "I'll give you a gun and a chance to go for it. "You'll never make it. That much I can promise."

"All men must die," Matsubi said with a sigh.

He and Deveer walked together, Rick a few feet behind. They went down two levels in the elevator, then followed a corridor to a large bare room. Inside this room Matsubi stopped.

He pointed to a closed door on the far side of the room.

"Your young woman is in there," he said. "I have kept my word," he added, with a slight smile.

Rick glanced at Deveer. "Unbuckle your gun belt," he said. "Kick the gun across the room."

Deveer obeyed without expression.

Rick ordered them both then to a corner of the room where he covered them while he crossed and opened the door. When they reached the corner he stepped quickly to the door and jerked it open.

There was a light in the ceiling of the room. The room was small, square and unfurnished, except for a narrow cot. Clare Holloway, the American girl, was lying on this cot.

Rick stared at her and he felt the blood suddenly hammering in his temples. His face stiffened and then his stomach twisted in a spasm of nausea.

The girl on the cot was unconscious. Her eyes were closed and only the faint rise and fall of her breast indicated that she was still alive.

She shouldn't be alive, he thought with dull horror. No human being should be alive in that condition.

She had been mutilated beyond recognition. His mind was unable to absorb the full horror of her appearance. Thoughts flicked through his consciousness in splintered fractions.

She was naked, except for a white loin cloth. Her body had been burned horribly. He pressed his hands against his temples and his thoughts flashed like the dancing of a kaleidoscope.

Her legs were contracted, shrivelled. The flesh of her body was blackened and the mutilation had been performed by a perverted madman.

SOMEONE had devoted himself to this task. Someone had lingered

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over this orgy of sadism, perfecting each monstrosity, laboring over each detail with the zeal of a fanatic.

Her face had been left untouched. It rose from the hideously ruined body like a fair white flower. But the lines of pain in that unconscious face told their own story.

He had no way of knowing how long he stood there. Time lost its meaning. And through his mind there came a strange sound.

He heard it dully. It seemed out of place, horribly so. It was as incongruous as the sound of a harsh oath before a shrine; the rasping of a file during a symphony; a mocking laugh against the sounds of weeping.

The sound became identified. The sound was laughter.

He turned and Matsubi chuckled again.

"A masterpiece, is it not?" he said lightly.

There was no reason left in Rick's mind. This thing that was laughing must be destroyed. Its body broken, its features smashed, its ability to laugh stilled forever.

He raised his gun slowly, blindly. He never fired the shot. There was a flash before his eyes and a numbing force struck his arm. He cried out involuntarily, and he heard the gun strike the floor with a metallic ring.

Standing before him was Lellamy! There was an anguished expression on her beautiful face.

"You gave away our power with the black talisman," she said. "I am helpless now. He who holds the stone holds me. He who holds me commands my power."

Matsubi came to her side. His chuckle sounded again. He looked at Lellamy and then at Rick.

"My men caught an old man named Lento when they were searching for you. Lento told us the story of the black stone. I regarded it as a child's fantasy. But it was worth trying. I seem now to have summoned a most valuable assistant."

He paused and began to smile. "I am in a very good position again. With the obedience of this creature I may recoup what you have caused me to lose. Your stupidity and wantonness has ruined a lifetime of work. There was some satisfaction for me when I saw your face after you had looked on the American girl."

Rick had trouble speaking. The rage and sickness in him was like something evil.

"Why did you do that?" he choked.

"I didn't do it," Matsubi smiled. "I gave her to Major Kok. I instructed him to hold her until we captured you. I thought that you might be more cooperative if we had her as a lever." He stopped and sighed. "I was a fool to trust the major. He couldn't restrain himself with such a delicate responsive subject. He began to play with her, I understand. Lightly and carefully. But the excitement of such pleasures is a powerful stimulant. He lost his control and finally produced the frightfully perfect result you have witnessed. I had to have him shot," he concluded casually.

Deveer was standing beside Matsubi now. He had come up on him silently. His face was impassive and set.

"We're in charge again, eh?" he said.

"Yes, yes," Matsubi said. "We will eliminate the two Americans and go to work. Perhaps our plans will still materialize."

"The American girl is dead?"

"I believe she is alive. The major was too much a scientist to let her die. I imagine he could have used her for years." He looked at the red haired Lellamy and then at Rick. "Your

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time is at hand," he said slowly. Glancing again at Lellamy, he said, "If I order you to destroy him, you will do so?"

"I will be forced to," Lellamy said tonelessly.

"In that case," Matsubi said, "I order you to destroy him immediately."

Lellamy's anguished eyes met Rick's. "I'm sorry," she whispered. Then she raised the wand in her hand.

DEVEER moved then, with incredible speed. He drove hard into Matsubi, knocking him to the ground. He sprawled on top of him, his right hand clawing for the Jap's pocket. His hand came out clutching the egg-sized black stone.

"Hold everything!" he growled.

Matsubi scrambled for the gun Deveer had kicked across the room. Deveer dove after him.

Rick dropped to one knee and scooped up his gun. The tension within him was gone. He was a smoothly functioning, nerveless machine.

He shot Matsubi in the back of the head. Deveer wheeled around and Rick fired again. The second shot caught Deveer in the chest. He went backward, coughing, a surprised, hurt look on his face.

Lellamy stooped and picked the black stone from his fingers.

Deveer hoisted himself painfully on one elbow. His eyes met Rick's and he grinned tightly.

"Like everything else I grab," he said, gasping painfully. "It turns out to be no good. I came around, Rick, but it was too late. When I got what happened to the kid I was waiting for a break. I got it when Matsubi was concentrating on you. I'm glad you got me, though. I've been a heel and it's time for me to make that last landing."

He grinned and then his face tightened with pain. He raised one hand slowly in a salute. Halfway to his forehead the hand stopped, fell limp.

Deveer died.

Lellamy came to Rick's side. She held out the stone but he shook his head miserably. He went to the door of the room the girl was lying in and forced himself to look at her again.

"This is she?" Lellamy whispered.

Rick nodded. He couldn't trust himself to speak.

"And you love her?"

"Yes."

Lellamy looked at him and there was pain now in her eyes. "I have offered you love," she said softly. "You gave me missions of hate. I will do something for you now that has something in it of love."

SHE stepped past Rick into the room. The wand rose in the air and a soft lambent beam poured from its tip. She played the gentle beam over the girl's body, moved it slowly back and forth.

Where the beam touched it healed. The flesh gleamed pink and fresh, the twisted limbs filled and relaxed. The girl's breathing became even and regular as her beauty returned, as the ravages faded, disappeared and were replaced with the original loveliness.

Finally Lellamy passed the beam over the girl's face and the lines of pain were slowly erased.

The beam faded then and Lellamy lowered the wand to her side. "The memory of it will be gone from her mind," she said. "She may dream of it and be terrified, but when she wakes it will be dream. Be kind to her."

Rick went to his knees beside the bed, caught the girl in his arms. She opened her eyes, then put her arms about his neck.

"Rick, Rick," she whispered. "Where

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have you been?"

"It's okay now," he said.

"Yes, it's all right now," she said. She hugged him again and then she was aware of her unclad condition. She gave a little cry. "It will be when I get decent, anyway."

"I'll find you something," he said.

He turned and Lellamy smiled at him. There was patience and wisdom and loneliness in the smile. "Will you take me back to the grotto, Rick?" she said softly.

"Yes," he said slowly.

"We will find the one you call Peter. I would like him to come, too. On the way we will tell your love of what has happened."

THE great double doors of the grotto were closed. At a signal from Lellamy they opened slowly. There was mist about the four that stood in the cavern before the grotto. Strange radiant light played about them and from somewhere music drifted to them. Music that was resigned and lonely, muted and soft.

"What is that?" Peter asked. His young face was puzzled. He seemed apart from all of them, like a person who is a stranger in his own home. Like a man homesick for a land he has never seen, who yearns for a place he can never go.

"Maybe it is because I have known a moment of loneliness," Lellamy said with a strange smile.

"Better that than an eternity of loneliness," Peter said.

"I will have that, too."

She looked at them then, but longest at Rick, before turning toward the grotto. The doors back now and the altar and urn were visible. From the urn vapors of many colors rose and disappeared toward the vaulted ceiling.

Lellamy walked through the doors and the vapors caught in her brilliant hair, surrounded her in swirling clouds. She seemed to grow taller as she neared the altar, and her head shown against the pale whiteness of the fog.

She turned slowly and waved to them. There was a soft lonely smile on her lips and they could see her eyes, empty and yearning through the mists.

Then the door began to close slowly. The music, the lonely muted music rose about them, swelling unbearably, then fading softly.

The doors were closing slowly.

Peter caught Rick's arm.

"This is what I couldn't tell you about," he said. He was speaking almost to himself and the words tumbled out excitedly. He swept an arm about in an exultant gesture. "I couldn't tell anybody about it. The loneliness, I always felt, that was always eating me away inside. I don't feel that when I'm here, Rick." He caught Rick and turned him about, stared into his face. "Am I crazy, Rick? I want to stay with her. Am I crazy, Rick?"

Rick looked into his flushed, transcendentally happy face and he shook his head.

"You've found it, Peter. The thing you looked for in war. You've found it here in the grotto."

Peter stared at the closing doors and then he laughed.

"I'll keep it then, Rick."

He waved to them and ran toward the doors. He slipped through the narrowing aperture and then his figure disappeared in the swirling fog that had enveloped Lellamy.

Rick put his arm about Clare's shoulder as the massive figured doors closed forever, and the music that swelled about them changed—slowly at first—but then faster and faster, until its tone was joyous and triumphant.

THE END

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ANCIENT BARBERING CUSTOMS

★ By FRANCES YERXA ☆

THE barber has always been an important craftsman in the East. The Egyptians cultivated their long hair the same as the Assyrians, and it was quite an art to curl and crisp and plait their long tresses in the fantastic devices then in use. The Egyptians, contrary to the surrounding nations, wore no beards, in fact, they used a depilatory to remove the hair from their whole body. Joseph was careful to shave before going into the presence of Pharaoh. It would have been an insult to the king to appear before him unshaven or with the hair undressed. Some men took great pride in their long beards, encouraging the growth and carefullly trimming them; but they never used dyes, for a grey beard was esteemed as most honorable. Men would swear by their beards, or in cursing would say "May your beard be cut off," because this was never done willingly; only on occasion of calamity or as a sign of deep mourning. This practice was also made a means of punishment; as the Amorites shaved off half the beards of David's messengers becaues they thought them spies. Some Oriental Jews shaved their heads by injunction of their prophet Mohammed. The custom was a very ancient one and, in some cases, was practiced by the Israelites; but the Moslems left a tuft of hair on the crown so that the Angel of the Tomb might thereby carry them to paradise.

The first time a boy's head was shaved, usually at the age of three or four, it was conducted as a ceremony. Prayers from the Koran were said during the operation and a victim, usually a goat, was slain at the tomb of a saint and then a feast was made of it for friends and strangers. These various duties were in the care of the barber. He was usually the dentist and the village doctor. His universal remedy consisted of bleeding, for they believed that all disease was in the blood. Barbers performed this bleeding operation with a lancet, on the arm usually, but sometimes on the temples, behind the ears or, if the case required it, on the feet. They also kept leeches for those who preferred them. The old sign of the barber shop, still in use in this country, a long white pole with a red band around it, had its origin in the Eastern barber's practice of blood letting.

GREEK RING LEGENDS

☆ By JUNE LURIE ☆

ISMENIAS of Thebes was chosen as emissary to a mighty Persian king. When he arrived at the castle he was told by the master of the ceremonies that the king would expect him to bow down before him. The Greeks did not go for this custom because it was a slam at their own dignity and also because it was an act of divine homage offered to a mortal instead of a god. But it was imperative that he accept this custom because the success of his mission depended on it. So as he approached the throne, he purposely dropped the ring he was wearing and so stooped to pick it up. In doing this he pleased everybody, for the Greeks in the court understood the ruse and their pride was saved, and the Persian monarch thought he had been paid due homage.

The iron ring was very popular in the days of the Romans. It was worn as a mark of honor. In Rome every freeman had the right to wear one. Also their heroes wore them, but those who had committed a crime were deprived of this honor. Gold rings were not worn in Rome until the honor was granted to the ambassadors assigned to a foreign state, and then only during their term of office. Afterward the custom spread to the senators and chief magistrate, who were permitted to wear the gold seal ring only in public, but continued to do so in private. After a while the right of granting the privilege of wearing the gold ring, which belonged exclusively to the emperors, was given to minor officials who proceeded to abuse the privilege. This annoyed Serverus who was the Roman Emperor in 146-211 A.D., that he granted the privilege of wearing the gold ring to all the Roman soldiers. But the Roman army must have worn them surreptitiously in defiance of custom long before that time because after the battle of Cannae in 216 B.C., the victorious Hannibal ordered all the gold rings taken from the fingers of the Roman officers. It was reported that the rings filled three bushel baskets.

Another custom in Rome connected with rings was the key ring worn on a finger. This must have been rather awkward. Another custom was to deliver a ring to a person you thought might be about to die. This was a sign of great respect for the recipient.

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The sudden, nerve-shattering blast turned the world upside down, and the woman along with it

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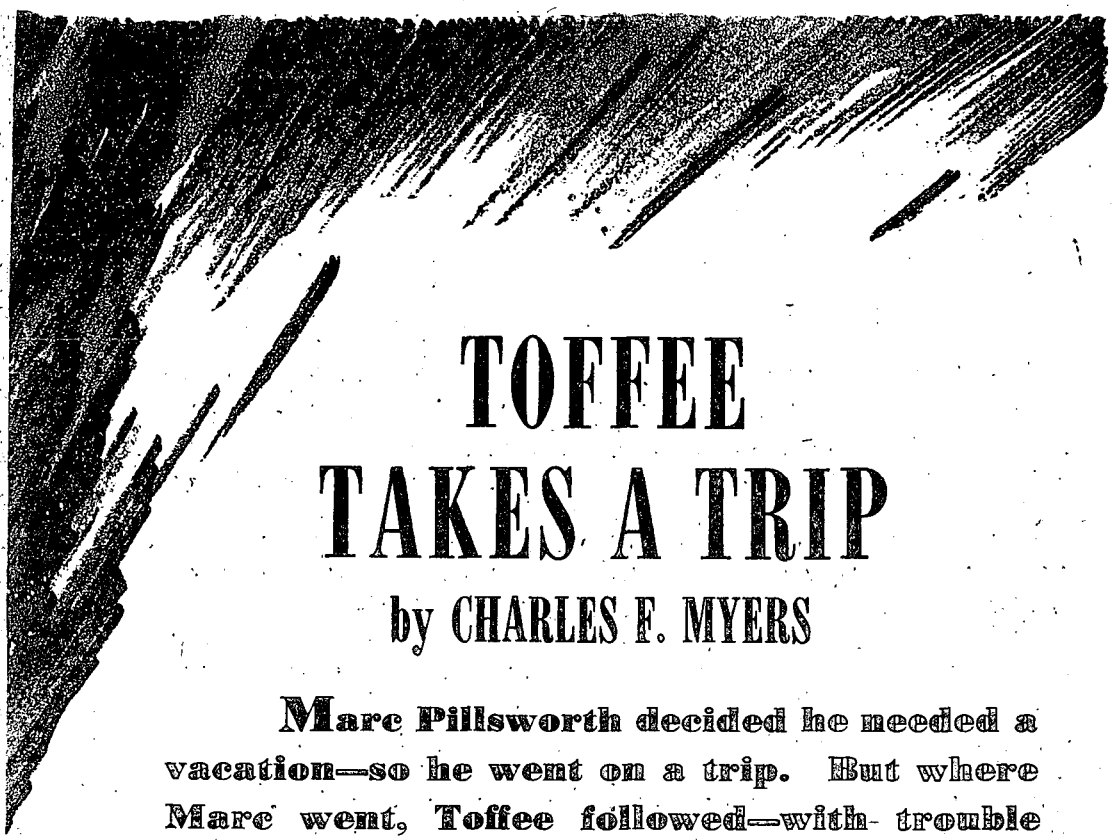

TOFFEE TAKES A TRIP

by CHARLES F. MYERS

Marc Pillsworth decided he needed a vacation—so he went on a trip. But where Marc went, Toffee followed—with trouble

GLUMLY, situated in sandy discomfort, Marc Pillsworth watched as another blustering wave tripped, fell flat on its watery face, and embarrassedly dissolved into a foolish fringe of giggling froth. It was the sameness of the thing that was getting him down, the business of being constantly sold short on a promise of something interesting. He rolled carefully over, onto his stomach, which had, by now, become a bloody shade of vermillion, and transferred the sunny torture to his back, which had only reached a color, approximately that of tomato soup. Taken either way, front or back, and considering his bright yellow trunks, he was, as the biographers always say, a pretty colorful citizen. Also, as the biographers never say, he was a pretty dejected one.

With one slender finger he traced a circle in the gritty surface before him, then jabbed viciously into its center. There was something frightening, deliberate in the action, especially when it was known that, to Marc, the circle represented the eye of a rascally unknown writer of magazine articles. It seemed only a matter of time before he entered into the refreshing pastime of sticking pins into wax effigies. He didn't really wish the fellow any harm; only that he'd break his treacherous neck by next Saturday at the latest.

Marc was certain that on the eve of his last earthly day he would be able to point an enfeebled finger squarely at the present day and the three preceeding it, and assuredly say, "That was the darkest period of my life." He didn't know which magazine article had planted the hideous idea of separate vacations in Julie's golden head, but he

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had already sworn violence, bloodshed, and even sudden death to its author if ever he found out. That a man should spend two weeks in a beach house without his wife was plainly, to him, a new and outstanding high in sheerest idiocy. He was only surprised that in a country so nearly glutted with legislation of all descriptions, there should be no laws to protect an unwary husband against the published oozings of so loathsomely promiscuous a mind as would endorse, and even encourage, the diabolical arrangement of separate vacations.

Ennui was setting in like a sort of spiritual rigor mortis. The first day, he had golfed and gotten sunburned, the second, he had ridden and gotten sunburned, and the third, he had fished and gotten sunburned. Now, in desperation, he was reducing the whole tortuous process to its primary element, and simply getting roasted to a flaming crisp with as little exertion as possible.

WITH eyes that were as optimistic as a slab in the morgue, he gazed up the face of the cliff, beyond the highway running along its edge, and to the beach house on the hill at the other side. It was just as he had supposed. There was no car out front . . . no jaunty blue convertible . . . and more to the point, no Julie. She hadn't changed her mind. He didn't know why he should think she would. It would serve her right, he thought spitefully, if Toffee chose this precise time to make a new entrance into his life.

He folded his hands before him and muzzled his chin into their hollow. He'd been too busy to give Toffee much thought lately, but now that she'd slipped into his consciousness, he found that he recalled her with curiously mixed feelings. Pleasure finally proved to be the strongest, however, and he began to smile for the first time in several days.

Lord knows there was proof enough of Toffee's existence . . . almost too much . . . but still it took an effort to realize that such a phenomenon could actually be. And Toffee was a phenomenon in every sense of the word . . . even a few that wouldn't bear repeating. With her, it was a matter of "Out of sight, *IN* mind," and vice versa. A creation of Marc's imagination . . . a lovely, vivacious phantom of his dreams . . . she had seen fit on various occasions to materialize from his subconscious and uninvitedly play an active role in his everyday affairs. During the duller stretches of his life, she was apparently content to bide her time in the tranquil valley of his mind, but given a moment of high excitement, she was sure to materialize and gleefully build it into a full fledged crisis with free wheeling.

At first, Marc had found it difficult to believe he would ever become accustomed to this peculiar arrangement, but apparently he had, for now, as he thought of Toffee, it was not with awe of the curious circumstance under which she existed, but rather with an almost wistful loneliness for the girl, herself. It was true, he realized, that pandemonium could not be far behind with Toffee on the threshold, but he couldn't help the feeling that his current doldrums could do with a dash of her particular brand of redheaded chaos like a man in a death chamber could do with a shiny new, cross-cut file. It was just as he had come to this decision that alien voices broke through the delicate wall of his quiet, introspective mood, and left it shattered beyond recall.

HIS head darted up, and his hand raked back a disordered shock of

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hair that had fallen over his brow. Thus uncovered, his eyes, two charred embers projected through the throbbing sheet of flame that was his face, strained upward, to the top of the cliff, in search of the noisy intruders. Usually no one ever came to this particular beach, except himself, and he had come to think of it as exclusively his own. But if he were preparing to relinquish his solitude to a band of vapid, would-be bathers, he was quite, quite mistaken, for much to the contrary, at the head of the crude board stairway leading down to the tiny beach, there stood two of the most unlikely homo sapiens he had ever seen. They looked like the culls of a dyspeptic nightmare.

The man was short, stocky, mostly bald, and at the moment, extremely animated. But the woman at his side was another matter entirely. Nearly six feet tall, an almost ghostly figure without a trace of color, she was a cruel and unconditional triumph of plainness. Worse than a horse of another color, she was a horse without any color at all. It was hard to believe that blood, rather than water—or perhaps acid—ran in her veins. She was listening intently to what the little man was saying, but there was something clearly argumentative in the inclination of her raw-boned, equine body.

"But I tell you he's done it!" the little man wailed.

"But I tell *you*," the woman trumpeted authoritatively, "It just isn't possible. The old fool couldn't! It won't work!"

"You'll see! You'll see!" the little man piped in a voice that was becoming increasingly mindful of an amusement pier calliope. "He's done it!'

And suddenly turning, he started down the rickety flight of steps as fast as his hammy little legs could carry him. He seemed almost to jitter along them as he sped downward, his bald pate glistening nervously in the bright afternoon sun. The faded woman, apparently still partially unconvinced, hung back for a moment, gazing icily after him. Then suddenly, with a for-better-or-worse but I bet it'll-be-worse shrug of her mammoth shoulders, she decided to follow. Awkwardly, like a runaway beer wagon, she began jolting down the steps, two at a time. The ancient board creaked a feeble threat, but didn't make it good.

Marc, watching this baffling performance with open-faced curiosity, rolled over and boosted himself into an upright position, so as to have a better view of it. Whoever these newcomers were, and whatever they had come there for, he was inclined to regard them as a blessing, no matter how shabbily disguised. Anything that happened now was bound to be a relief from the endless monotony of the last few days. After all, the newcomers might be members of some wayward, secret cult, come here for a sort of pagan ritual. It was a good deal to hope for, and hardly likely, but his jaded mind clutched hungrily at the idea.

Now on the beach, the two principal actors in whatever drama was about to be performed, moved swiftly past the rock behind which Marc rested and raced purposefully to the left. This only lent further intrigue to the affair since such a course, if followed to it's ultimate end, could only lead them crashingly against a further wall of the cliff. And considering the rate at which the pair were traveling, such a collision seemed altogether probable . . . even imminent. Eagerly, Marc jack-knifed forward to keep them in sight.

BUT about half way to the wall, the little man skidded to a disordered stop and pointed a chubby finger toward

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a large rock that jutted straight and tall from the sands, like a staunch sentinel standing guard. "That one'll do," she shrilled, and to Marc's bitter disappointment, disappeared behind the boulder's shielding bulk. The woman, still reluctant, paused at the rock's edge.

"It won't work," she insisted. But her voice had now lost some of its authority. She followed her companion into the obscurity behind the rock.

Marc would have given his immortal soul, along with his only copy of Forever Amber, to have known what it was that was not going to work behind that boulder. He felt meanly cheated. He felt that the intruders, like the waves, had led him to expect great things, then deliberately let him down. For a moment he knew what it was to be a trusting chorus girl who had been promised jewels, only to find, by the morning's depressing light, that she had received only a hangover and a pair of cheap stockings. He knew what it was to—

Then, suddenly, he only knew panic as a tremendous explosion grasped the little beach and shook it like a limp dishrag. Rocks, dislodged from the face of the cliff, began to fall everywhere through churning, sand-laden air. Marc wasn't bored any more. He clutched the rock at his side with all the zeal of an impassioned suitor back home after a three-year absence on a desert island. His attitude clearly intimated that he loved that rock dearly and nothing would ever part him from it. Something that was not a rock landed thuddingly at his side, but he was too distracted to notice.

"Earthquake!" he gasped.

"Earthquake, my left eye!" a voice grunted thickly. And Marc's head snapped about to find the ghostly woman looking up at him with startled eyes. She had exchanged locations with amazing rapidity. Lying on her stomach, arms, legs, and hair in a distressing state of disarray, she looked like nothing so much as a bloodless witch who had suffered a rather devastating crash landing. Certainly, she had descended as from the heavens, and yet, one glance told you that her association was certainly not with things astral. With stunning directness, she parted bluish lips and spat an impossible quantity of sand onto the beach where it looked much more natural.

Marc shrank back suspiciously. Perhaps it wasn't the gallant thing to do, but it seemed prudent. "What . . . what happened?" he asked timidly.

"How should I know?" the woman asked bitterly, beginning an unconcerned inventory of her various parts. "I was too busy getting away from it to notice." Then, pummeling an embarrassingly intimate region with vigorous enthusiasm, she seemed to come to the comforting conclusion that she had passed through her ordeal still in possession of all she had started out with. Just why this should mean anything to her, Marc could not fathom. It seemed to him that any change, willy-nilly, could hardly miss being an improvement. No matter what ever happened to the woman, it could never be any worse than the awful trouncing that nature had already given her. She got stiffly to her feet and peered cautiously over the rock.

"Holy mother!" she breathed. "They're gone like a maiden's illusions!"

"What?" Marc asked. "What's gone?"

"The rock," the woman replied with dismaying heartiness, "and Mr. Epperson. He's gone too." Obviously, these missing items had been listed in the order of their importance.

"You . . . you mean the little fel-

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low? He's dead?" Marc asked shakily.

"Exceptionally so, I should say," the woman replied almost gleefully. "Look for yourself."

MARC accepted the invitation reluctantly, and peered around the edge of the rock with eyes that were only partly open. Then he gasped with amazement. It wasn't that there was so much to see, but rather that there was so little. Certainly, there was no sign of the rock or the little man. In the spot where they should have been, however, there was a deep hole in the sand that looked much like the work of a sizable dredger. Around this, there seemed to linger a sort of undefined gaseous body.

"Where . . . where is he . . . the little man, I mean!" he asked hesitantly.

"I told you," the woman replied impatiently. "He's gone."

"But his . . . his remains? Where are they?"

"Vaporized, most likely," the woman answered airily, as though explaining a self-evident mathematical rule to a not-too-bright child.

"Vaporized?" The word seemed meaningless when applied to human bodies.

"Certainly. Those gases you see out there are all that's left of him."

Marc stared at the illusive last remains of Mr. Epperson, and shuddered.

"A noisy way to go," the woman reflected philosophically, "but nice and clean." She seemed to be speaking of an experiment that had turned out with surprising success. "He was a dirty little pest anyway. I never did like having him around." She smiled and it was no improvement. "I'll bet it's the first time anyone's ever gone to heaven with a rock . . . if he went there at all."

"What happened to him? What did it?"

The woman regarded Marc thoughtfully for a time and seemed to come to a decision. She reached into the pocket of her grimy skirt and drew forth a minute, white capsule. She held it out for his inspection. "See that?" she asked.

"Just barely," Marc answered truthfully. "It's awfully small."

"And awfully powerful," the woman went on with dramatic emphasis. "That's what did it. Anyway, it was one just like that."

"What is it? What's it made of?"

"I don't know for sure," the woman replied. "It might be anything . . . even common dirt. It doesn't matter. The point is that whatever it is, it's been charged so that when it's exposed to air, it just naturally blows everything around it all to hell and gone. Mr. Epperson opened the other one, and I guess that's why he was vaporized. I ducked around the rock just in time."

"But that's impossible!" Marc protested.

"I know it," the woman said flatly. "It's as impossible as a three dollar bill. But it works, just the same. Look what it did to old Eppy!"

Marc winced. He couldn't help the feeling that nothing good could come from such blatant familiarity with the dead. "Where did you get those things?" he asked, changing the subject.

"They're the brain child of a certain Dr. Herrigg," the woman replied. "I always thought there was something offside about the old crow, and now that I know it, I'm going. . . ."

Suddenly, she was interrupted by a nasty cracking sound, and Marc quickly took up his old courtship with the rock, lest it be the overture to another explosion. He sensed, rather than saw or heard, the woman dropping to his

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side.

"What was that?" he whispered. Then he turned to the woman and started back in horror. She was lying face-down in the sand, and the hole at the base of her skull was clearly visible. The matter of the fluid running in her veins was settled beyond all argument; it was blood.

BLINDLY following a first impulse, Marc leaped to his feet to see where the shot had come from. He regretted it almost instantly. No sooner had he gotten on eye level with the top of the rock, than there was a second cracking sound and a bullet whined viciously past his ear, like a great, lethal gnat. He hugged the rock again, wondering incongruously if he were to spend the rest of his life in a crouching position. It seemed such a vulgar position in which to die. In the brief moment of his exposure, he had seen a small, grey-haired figure, with a pointed, sharp-featured face, and a gun to match. The sight had done much to shake Marc's confidence in his own future. Indeed, he imagined that this, approximately, was what the mystery writers were referring to when they mentioned a "tight spot." And the sound of footsteps descending the stairway convinced him that his own personal spot was swiftly becoming downright constricting. His eyes, wide and wild, frantically ran the length of the beach.

There was only one choice, and it was a dismally unknown quantity. Cut off from the stairway, he would have to crawl along the base of the bluff in the opposite direction, keeping down behind the covering rocks as well as he could. He wasn't sure just where such a path might lead, but it held one feature that appealed to him overwhelmingly; it would at least put a distance between himself and the man with the gun, who's deadly acquaintance he was reticent to make.

By the time Marc had come to the end . . . the dead end . . . of his tortuous path, his knees, with a trim of parsley, would easily have made an attractive addition to even the best butcher's display. Still crouching, he drew himself stiffly up, and sat down on a flat rock to inspect his damaged joints. Finally satisfied that they had not been worn all the way through, no matter how much they felt like it, he gave his attention over to the situation at hand. It looked hopeless.

To his left, and in front of him, there was nothing but ocean; to his right, a grey-haired killer; and directly behind him, the sheer, stoney face of the cliff. There was nothing to do but hope for the best . . . in spite of an insistent feeling that the best would be none too good. He picked up a loose stone and regarded it bleakly. Compared to the gun he'd glimpsed on the beach, it looked loathsomely harmless.

MARC couldn't have said exactly how long he'd been sitting there, looking like an unhappy throw-back to the stone age, but the afternoon light had already begun to fade from the sky, and the rock in his hand had become heavy. He guessed it was about an hour. Why hadn't the man followed him? He gazed toward the darkening sea, and fished vainly for some meaning, some key, to the afternoon's events. In them there had been surprise and danger, but over it all, there had also been the discoloring shadow of unreality. He began to wonder if it hadn't all been just a delusion born of over-exposure to the sun. After all, during the summer months, fried brains weren't the exclusive property of the local restaurant owner. They were

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anybody's, just for the basking.

Somewhat bolstered by this possibility, but still wary, Marc stood up and peered apprehensively over the shielding barrier of rocks. There was no sound, no movement, anywhere. Hesitantly, still crouching, but not on his hands and knees this time, he started back. In spite of a halting, stop-and-go progress, it was only a matter of five minutes before he was back on the beach proper. Just before he reached the point where he had abandoned the body of the nameless woman, he stopped again, longer this time. Finally, like a man about to plunge into a pool of iced water, he sucked in his breath and stepped resolutely around the side of the rock. Then he stopped short. The body was gone.

When he'd recovered sufficiently from this surprise, he gazed uneasily over the top of the rock to the main part of the beach. It was utterly deserted. Outside of the still missing stone, it was just as he had first seen it that day. He shrugged and started toward the stairway. Sun-stroke or whatever, forces had obviously been at work that were hopelessly beyond his comprehension.

He climbed the complaining stairs, crossed the deserted road, and made his way up the path to the beach house.

For a moment, as he looked at the small, streamlined dwelling, his earlier mood of loneliness was sharply recalled to him. It was a place meant for parties and gaiety and carefree companionship. Without these things, it seemed rejected and forlorn; like a lovely, giddy girl dressed for a ball and left waiting by a heartlessly indifferent beau. He forced the feeling aside and hurried on.

Finding the door open, just as he had left it, he stepped inside and started to close it against the growing chill of the evening. His hand started forward, then froze in mid-air. Behind him, in the dimness of the tiny reception hall, he'd heard a faint rustling sound, and swung quickly about. But not soon enough. Instantly, something cold, hard, and as decisive as a tombstone, struck him across the side of the head. The room began to spin deliriously.

'Round and 'round the little room traveled, until it had become nothing more than a dizzy, churning whirlpool. For a moment Marc teetered precariously on its brink, then suddenly caught in its expanding tide, lost his footing and plunged downward.

Spiraling helplessly toward the center of the whirling, fluid cylinder, he could see that its center was dark, and he was frightened. He tried to fight the dragging current, but it was no use. Next, he was caught in that darkness, and was spinning dizzily downward, faster and faster, like a great, human pinwheel.

Marc had lost all sense of time before his frantic journey was ended. It might have lasted a split second or an hour. He didn't know. But when it was over, he was grateful. Landing flat on his stomach, he lay perfectly still for a time, his eyes closed. Curiously, now that he had come to rest, a strange feeling of contentment was slowly creeping over him. He didn't know where he was, but he was glad to be there.

TURNING slowly over, swinging his long legs before him, he opened his eyes and gazed about. At first he was blinded by a bright light that seemed to come from everywhere. A bit at a time, however, his surroundings began to swim into view. He discovered, piece-meal, that he was in an immense room; apparently some sort of filing room, for the walls, on every side, were lined to a distant ceiling with

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business-like filing cabinets. Against the opposite wall stood a metal ladder that was fastened at its base to a track that stretched evenly around the room. He still couldn't discover where the light was coming from, but it was bluish and very bright.

"Hello," a voice said softly above him, and Marc, glancing up, thought it sounded vaguely familiar. He was right. Perched on the uppermost rung of the ladder, and dangling a pair of scandalously perfect legs, sat Toffee. Clothed, as always before, only in a scrap of transparent, emerald colored material, her figure was being shockingly frank about its own perfection. It seemed almost conceited in its exciting loveliness. She smiled roguishly and her green eyes sparkled through the distance. There was a quick flash of red hair as she swung about and started down the ladder.

"You would come just when I'm busiest," she scolded happily, swinging easily from step to step. "I should have known it. When could I ever expect any consideration from the likes of you?"

Rather than enter into preposterous argument with his own senses, Marc admitted that she was actually there, before him. He knew by now that he would have to sooner or later, anyway. "Busy?" he asked with as matter-of-fact a voice as he could manage. "Busy with what?"

"Your files, of course," Toffee replied lightly, jumping with kittenish softness to the floor, disdainful of the last three steps. "This is the end of the year for you, mentally."

"What files?"

"Didn't you see the sign when you came in?"

"The way I came in," Marc replied sourly, "I didn't see anything."

"Oh, of course not," Toffee agreed. "Just looking down that way and seeing you here all of a sudden, I forgot for a moment that you were from outside. Well, just so you'll know, this is the Miscellaneous Information chamber of your mind. You've never been here before. You've only seen the valley of your mind." She smiled demurely. "I guess you're just naturally drawn to wherever I happen to be. But I do wish you'd seen the sign. It's an idea I got from outside, in your world. It's all lit up with mental impulses. . . . just like neon. It's really beautiful."

Marc winced. That his mind might someday become a mental replica of Broadway was the most repulsive idea he'd had to face in weeks. Toffee would be setting up a chain of "Grey Matter" hot dog stands next. "Miscellaneous Information?" he asked, uncertainly.

"Yes," Toffee said, with the professional air of a paid guide giving a fifty cent tour. "In a year's time, you pick up more odd facts and figures than you think. If they were left lying around, your mind would look like a city dump. So at the end of every fiscal year, it's my job to gather them all together and file them alphabetically under topic headings. Then, it's always here when you need it, unless it's too out of date. See what I mean?"

Marc nodded slowly. "I guess so," he said, and his voice was laden with uncertainty. "But don't you think it's a little creepy?"

"Nonsense!" Toffee cried, dismissing the idea. Then her smile suddenly faded and her eyes became hard. "And while we're on the subject," she said menacingly, "there's something I'd like to ask you."

"What's that?"

TURNING to a small table nearby, she picked up a stiff white card, and

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flipped it angrily under his nose. "Just you tell me," she demanded hotly, "How you happened to pick up the bust measurements of the entire Gaities chorus!"

Marc's expression was one of utter stupification for a moment, then it relaxed. "Oh, that!" he exclaimed with false heartiness.

"Yes, that!" Toffee echoed ruthlessly, placing one hand on a smooth hip.

"That's easy to explain," Marc went on quickly. "It all had to do with the advertising agency. We handled some ads for the Gaities."

"Ads?" Toffee sneered. "You mean they advertise things like *that!*"

"Well, no. Not exactly. It was really the show that we advertised."

"What a show it must be!" Toffee exclaimed sarcastically. "That Miss Flare La Greer must be a fair sensation every time she sets foot on a runway. With measurements like that, I wonder that there's any room left for the rest of them."

"Don't be vulgar," Marc put in without hope.

"If you ask me," Toffee said icily, "it's that La Greer moll that's being vulgar. She was born vulgar." Then her smile suddenly appeared as unexpectedly as a sunburst in the middle of a rain storm. "But if it's the way you say," she cooed, "I guess I'll just have to forgive you. Now let's say hello properly." She stretched her arms out toward Marc, and made quick, beckoning motions with her hands.

Marc was instantly on his feet. Of all the censorable things in the world, experience had taught him that Toffee's interpretation of a proper greeting would probably head the list. "Get away from me!" he yelped, backing into a filing case. "Stay mad! Hate me! Don't start that old stuff, or I'll. . . ."

"Or you'll what?" Toffee asked wickedly, sliding her slender arms smoothly around his neck.

It may have been Toffee's kiss that started the room spinning. Marc didn't know, and somehow, try as he would, he couldn't seem to make himself care. At any rate, it *was* spinning, and gaining speed at every turn. In a moment, it was whirling like a thing possessed, and Marc could feel himself being lifted easily upward. He opened his eyes and looked out with dismay. It was as though they had been caught in the very center of a gigantic tornado. Caught, just as he had been in the whirlpool only a moment before.

"Wow!" Toffee cried gleefully, her arms clasped tenaciously about his neck. "What a kiss!"

MARC groaned and rolled over. Then, lest it fall off, he clutched his head in his hands, and sat up. Instantly, he experienced a feeling that was like having several gross of heavy-duty ice picks driven into the base of the skull, just behind the left ear. He groaned again and tried to guess where he might be, but his mind, still in a state of churning confusion, would not be prodded into an answer. It was as limp and uninterested as an old, worn glove. He was surrounded by a brooding, unbroken darkness, and for a moment thoughts of coffins and coal bins chased each other unrelentingly over his tired brain. Then, experimentally, he reached a cautious hand into the blackness, and then quickly shrank back.

The touch of soft, cool flesh was not precisely what he had expected. Neither was he expecting the slap that was soundly administered across the bridge of his nose only a split second later.

"And don't tell me you were just looking for a match, either!" an irate feminine voice rasped. "I'll teach you

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to come pawing around me!"

"Toffee!"

"Marc!"

Immediately, two slender arms were about his neck, and Toffee was contritely saying, "I'm sorry Marc. I didn't know it was you. It didn't feel like you."

"How should you know how I feel?" Marc asked annoyedly, trying to disentangle himself from her insistent embrace. "Do you always have to say a thing so it sounds lecherous? Where did you come from, anyway?"

"I've materialized from your mind again," Toffee replied gaily, happy at the achievement. "You submerged into your subconscious and dreamed me up a moment ago, so naturally I just dropped everything and returned to consciousness with you. What kind of a mess have you gotten into this time?"

"Mess?"

"Yes. There must be something wrong or you wouldn't have been around bothering me. You never do come around," she added fretfully, "unless something's gone wrong." She patted his hand. "It's because you're such a low type, I guess."

"Holy smoke!" Marc cried, suddenly remembering the day's odd adventures. "You're right. Things are plenty wrong. I was ambushed!"

"Oh, no!" Toffee cried. How terrible! You're so young!"

"I was hit over the head," Marc added flatly.

"Oh," Toffee breathed with relief. "Where are we?"

Marc had already gotten to his feet and was fumbling along the wall. "I'm on vacation," he said through a dark distance. "We're at the beach house."

"Where's Julie?" Toffee asked with a tinge of apprehension, remembering that Julie, on other occasions, hadn't been precisely cordial.

"She's visiting her mother at the farm," Marc replied shortly. "She read an article about separate vacations."

"Craziest thing I ever heard," Toffee pronounced bluntly. "What are you doing, sanding that wall?"

"I'm looking for the light switch," Marc explained. "It's right by the stairway closet as I remember."

HIS hand, running out of wall, began fishing absently about in a narrow open space. "I think I've found the closet," he called reassuringly. Then, strangely, he was aware that the space had begun to widen, almost automatically it seemed. He guessed that the door was swinging open of its own volition, and attributed the phenomenon to faulty construction. He made a mental note to check the door in the morning. But what happened a second later could hardly have been explained by structural discrepancies. With truly alarming ferocity, two unidentified arms were flung about his waist, and caught off guard, he was carried crashingly to the floor. The darkness became alive with the sounds of conflict.

"Cut it out, Toffee!" Marc yelled, struggling wildly to free himself, and getting hopelessly entangled. "Try to restrain yourself! This is no time for playing games!"

"I'm perfectly restrained," Toffee called back suspiciously. "And who's playing games . . . and what kind of games? I'm just waiting for the lights."

"Then who's this on top of me?" Marc wailed, cagily fighting his way into a position that left him completely impotent against his unseen attacker.

"Why don't you ask him?" Toffee suggested helpfully through a jumble of scuffling, gasping sounds. "I'm sure I don't know." Swiftly, she started in search of the illusive light switch herself.

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"I don't think he's interested in formal introductions," Marc wheezed with what sounded like a dying gasp. "Hurry and get those lights on before he kills me. He's strangling me!"

As though in instant answer to his command, the room suddenly blazed with light, and Marc, seeing his assailant, almost nose to nose, turned deathly pale. His eyes snapped lightly shut, and turning his head to one side, his lips began to move feverishly, although his voice seemed to have deserted him. On his chest, face down, and in an immodest state of disorder, lay the lifeless figure of the woman on the beach.

Toffee gazed wrathfully on this grotesque display, and the usual hand moved threateningly to the usual hip. "Well, you might at least have the decency to stop whispering to her!" she hissed contemptuously. "The lights are on, you know! I can see you! I'm not blind!" She paused for a moment, and seeing no change in the distressing tableau, went on. "Tell that shameless wench to get up and get out of here! You never miss a chance do you? The minute the lights go out, you've got to be frisking about on the carpet!"

With a tremendous effort, Marc partly opened one eye and looked pleadingly up at her. He managed to force out a few wretched words. "She's . . . she's not a . . . a shameless wench," he whispered half-hysterically. "She's . . . she's a . . . a . . . a body!"

"I can see that for myself!" Toffee retorted hotly. "And not such a hot one, either, if you ask me. Now, tell her to gather up her flabby old body and drag it out that door, before I practice violence on it. Don't just lie there staring up at me like a wall-eyed clam!"

"But . . . but she can't!"

"Sodden drunk, eh?"

"No. She . . . she's a dead body." Marc's voice suddenly broke through its bonds and came back with unexpected force. "She's been shot!" he roared. "Get her off me before I lose my mind!"

The angry fire of suspicion flickered one last time in Toffee's eyes, then went out. She leaned down for a better look at the smothering figure. "How sinister!" she breathed.

"Don't waste time on adjectives!" Marc entreated. "Just get the horrible thing off me!"

TOFFEE forced a slender hand to the woman's shoulder, and with an incongruously dainty gesture rolled it from the distraught Marc. "It makes my spine fairly tingle," she said.

"What do you think it's done to mine?" Marc asked reproachfully, getting to his feet and rubbing the injured section.

Toffee continued to stare at the discarded body. "I do think you could have shown better taste in your choice of victims," she mused. "It couldn't have been a crime of passion, or passion isn't everything I've heard it is." Having satisfied herself on this point, she turned brightly to Marc. "Why did you shoot her?" she asked with honest curiosity.

"I didn't shoot her," Marc denied stoutly. "I only saw it done . . . down on the beach."

"Then what's that gun doing here?" Toffee asked, pointing to the corner.

Marc forced himself to pick up the revolver. It looked like the one he'd seen on the beach. Obviously, whoever had hit him, hadn't meant to kill him. It would have been so much easier to have shot him. "Someone's trying to frame me," he said, as though trying to explain this fact to himself.

"I don't blame them," was Toffee's prompt reply. "You're quite a picture in those yellow trunks. They set your

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sunburn off like a keg of dynamite."

"But what am I going to do with that body?" Marc asked, ignoring the irrelevant criticism. "If it's found here, they'll lock me up forever."

Toffee thoughtfully chewed a thumbnail. "You might try giving it to someone," she said pensively. "There must be just lots of people who are simply dying to have a body all their own. A person with an ingenuity at all could probably find all kinds of uses for it."

"Stop driveling," Marc broke in curtly. "And try to think of something useful. I'll try to get it back in the closet, then I'll have to change clothes. We'll decide what to do about it afterwards."

"You asked me," Toffee reminded him. "I don't suppose the woman really cares much what you do with her body. After all, she hasn't much use for it any more. And it wasn't really such a good one to begin with. I'm sure I wouldn't care what people did with mine."

"You never did," Marc snapped, and summoning the courage born of necessity, he lifted the figure reluctantly to his shoulder. "You have no modesty. And please don't go on like that about bodies. It's indecent."

"It's no more indecent than you in those trunks," Toffee retorted.

Marc propped the body in the closet and quickly closed the door.

"With legs like yours," Toffee went on, "I wouldn't even take a bath for consideration of the poor peeping Toms, much less go out on the beach where innocent women and children might see the things. They're horrible."

Marc had ignored the insult as long as he could. "What's wrong with my legs?" he asked woundedly.

"They're s k i n n y," Toffee said, thoughtfully taking stock, "and hairy. They look like a couple of twisted pipe cleaners . . . dirty pipe cleaners. They also turn the stomach and wither the soul."

"That's enough!" Marc yelled reddening. "Hereafter, I'll thank you to leave my pipe clean . . . my legs out of this. Just try to forget that I even have legs at all."

"Gladly," was the obliging reply. "I'll just pretend to myself that you're staggering about on hooks."

Blanching, Marc strove to restore his sense of dignity. He drew himself up to his full height, some six feet, two inches, and started regally up the stairs. With the gun still in his hand, he looked like a noble suicider. "I'll return," he said frigidly, "after I've put on some trousers." Then he stopped and regarded Toffee's transparent tunic with slow deliberation. "And while we're on the subject," he added quietly. "You might just try to do something about your own nakedness. It's revolting!"

MARC pulled on a discreetly colorful sport jacket and glanced at himself in the mirror. With the exception of a worried expression, everything he wore was in neat, conservative good taste. He sighed, left the room.

Downstairs, he crossed the reception hall, careful to give the closet a wide berth, and made his way into the darkened living room. He felt his way to a floor lamp and turned it on. Immediately, a bright circle of light spread over the thick carpet like ink through a blotter. Noting this common phenomenon without interest, he turned away, then stopped as the door at the opposite end of the room opened. Toffee, resplendent in a cunning arrangement of the dining room drapes, moved sinuously into the room with all the unconscious grace of a stalking panther.

The drapes, a bold flowery design on a background of white, had been fash-

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ioned into a bare midriff evening gown of truly provocative design. The two parts, obviously disdainful of each other, contrived to leave a maximum of midriff, while doing little or nothing toward covering their assigned portions. The skirt was widely split at one side, exposing an exquisite leg, like a diamond in a show case. Toffee's nod to decency had been most perfunctory indeed.

"Like it?" she asked, smiling radiantly. "You'd never dream that it used to cover windows, would you?"

"I'd never dream it ever covered anything," Marc replied amazedly. "And if it ever had any ambitions along those lines, they're certainly shot now."

"It was just an idea I had," Toffee replied proudly.

"In night clubs all over the country," Marc commented dryly. "Thousands of girls have that same idea three times nightly, only they get paid for their nakedness . . . or hauled into night court by the decency squad."

Fortunately, any further discussion of Toffee's "creation" was suddenly forestalled by the unexpected sound, from outside, of tires leaving pavement and turning grindingly onto gravel. Marc and Toffee ran swiftly to the window, where they vied athletically for a view of the drive; each for his own separate reason. Marc was having nightmarish visions of Julie, returned with a changed mind to share the remainder of his vacation. Toffee only knew that any addition, at this moment, was bound to be an interesting one.

"It's a man!" she breathed happily.

"Thank heaven," Marc sighed relievedly, then on second thought added, "Good grief!"

An instant later, a knock sounded at the front door and Toffee started eagerly toward the hall. "I'll let him in," she said over her shoulder.

"Don't!" cried Marc. "What about the thing in the closet?"

"Oh, that!" Toffee called back airily. "We'll have him hang his hat on a lamp or something." She continued toward the door.

"Stop!" Marc yelled commandingly.

And Toffee opened the door.

A LANKY rustic, replete with drooping mustache and high heeled boots gazed unbelievingly at the dream-like creature that had opened the door to him. And a great, wistful sadness came into his eyes. "I'm Morton Miller," he drawled with a voice that so perfectly completed the homespun picture it was hard to believe he hadn't arrived by stage coach.

"It could be worse," Toffee consoled, obviously in serious doubt of her own statement.

"I'm the sheriff," the fellow elaborated.

Marc and Toffee exchanged a glance that was a silent, two-way scream.

"You got a body, lady?"

"You ought to know," Toffee replied, snatching furtively after her retreating composure. "You've hardly taken your eyes off it."

The sheriff cleared his throat and his voice dug its toe awkwardly into a hay stack. "No, lady," he said nervously. "That ain't what I mean. I'm lookin' fer a dead body."

"We don't have any," Toffee lied promptly, as though speaking of termites.

"That's funny," the sheriff mused chattily, now on firmer ground. "A fella called me on the phone and said a woman'd been shot out here."

Marc swiftly joined them. He knew that the wheels of calamity had inexorably begun to turn. He could almost hear them grinding.

"What fellow?" Toffee was asking.

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"Don't rightly know. Wouldn't give his name. Had a sort of whiney voice, as I recollect. Sounded kinda goofy."

"He was goofy," Marc put in flatly. "Goofy as they come. No one's been shot here yet." Then, starting toward the door, he added, "Goodnight."

"Just a minute," the sheriff said, placing a mammoth foot firmly on the doorsill. "I gotta look around. It's my duty." He eyed Marc suspiciously "And just who are you?"

"I'm Marc Pillsworth," Marc said almost ashamedly. "This is my place."

The sheriff nodded, pushed the door open, and stepped authoritatively inside. Obviously, this was one arm of the law that had a well developed muscle, if not much else. "Always like to have the owner around, when I'm ransackin' fer a body," he said cryptically. "Usually find that's the bird that hid 'er there."

"You're making a mistake," Toffee objected weakly.

"Maybe," the sheriff replied composedly. Then he pointed to the closet. "First things first," he said with threadbare philosophy. "What's in there?"

"Nothing," Toffee replied with desperate casualness. "It's just an empty closet."

In an attempt at simulated innocence, Toffee had managed to look completely like a Borgia, caught with her cyanide showing. Morton Miller gazed briefly on this laughable performance, and started wordlessly toward the closet. Toffee followed quickly after him.

"Maybe you're right," she said with a surprising reversal of attitude. "You really ought to look around, and satisfy yourself that everything's all right. We wouldn't want you to go away feeling frustrated you know."

She stepped lightly in front of him and opened the closet door.

"It's pretty dark in there," the sheriff complained. "Ain't there a light?"

Toffee nodded. "It's loose," she explained. "I couldn't reach it to tighten it. But I'll bet you can. You're so tall, and all." She pointed to one of the closet's darkest corners. "It's back there."

The sheriff, a determined man if anything, followed the suggestion blindly, and moved into the inner darkness of the tiny compartment. Never had a man looked so much like a lamb going trustingly to slaughter.

IT HAPPENED just as Toffee had hoped it would. No sooner was the sheriff in the closet than she slammed the door and turned the key standing ready in its lock. It may even be that she closed the door a bit before the sheriff was fully inside, for there had been an undignified slapping sound that implied as much. Either way, however, the deed done, she turned breathlessly to Marc.

"Let's get out of here!" she cried. "You've been framed like a museum masterpiece."

Marc, too stunned to quite grasp the situation, stared at her blankly.

"What did you do with the gun?" Toffee went on.

"It's upstairs, on my bed," he murmured, gazing unbelievingly at the closet door.

The atmosphere within the closet was swiftly becoming agitated. A series of formidable thudding sounds was suddenly followed by a shriek that sounded like a fast freight going through a rural junction at midnight.

"I think the sheriff's found the body," Toffee commented dryly. "Well, it's what he was after, and he can't say we didn't do our best to help him. Let's get out of here. If he keeps that up, he'll wake the dead."

To Marc the remark seemed singu-

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larly ill-timed. Shudderingly, as he followed Toffee out the door, he tried not to think of the grim goings-on inside the darkened closet.

THE car swerved crazily, missed the oncoming truck by a sickeningly narrow margin, and sped on down the highway, followed by a shower of rare and salty explitives, recited with great sincerity by a truck driver who was undisputedly a master of spicy invective.

"I thought you knew how to drive," Marc moaned, moving his hands slowly away from his eyes.

"There's nothing to it," Toffee bragged, pressing the accelerator to the floor.

"There certainly isn't, the way you do it," Marc replied coldly. "You just step on the starter and, zoom!, before you know it, you're resting quietly in the morgue. It's a dandy arrangement if you have a passion for morgues. It just happens that I haven't."

"Nonsense!" Toffee cried. "You worry too much. A child could do it!"

"I'd rather a child did," Marc sighed defeatedly. "I'd feel safer."

"Watch this!" Toffee cried happily. And she started swinging the wheel recklessly from side to side so that the car careened deliriously back and forth, across the road. "There's no end to the fun you can have in a car!"

"Oh, yes there is!" Marc cried, clinging desperately to the door handle. "And ours should take place within the next ten seconds, if I'm any judge!"

"You're so morbid minded," Toffee complained.

Then, at the last possible moment, she swung the car sharply into a side road, and the evening stillness was hastily dispatched to the realm of memory by a shrieking protest from the tortured tires.

"Holy smoke!" yelled Marc. "If the sheriff isn't after us by now, the highway patrol must be."

Toffee didn't answer. She was too busy regaining a lost foothold on the accelerator. Marc noted with relief that the new road was deserted. At least she couldn't kill any innocent bystanders here. There was still a chance that manslaughter wouldn't be added to the list of their crimes.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Toffee replied toughly, from the side of her mouth. "Where *do* people go when they're making a getaway?"

"You don't have to talk like a gun moll," Marc admonished, and suddenly he was overcome with the hopelessness of the situation. It seemed that fate had gone out of its way to find new confusions for complicating his life. If things had been too monotonously simple only a few hours before, now they were too hecticly complex. They had gone far beyond his capacity for such things. Through it all, Marc was wishing that Julie were there to console and advise him, as she had so often in the past. It was only a matter of a moment before he was lost deep in a reverie in which only the stillness of the night, his wife and himself existed. The car began to loose its speed.

"Stop that!" Toffee's voice said with unnatural faintness. "You're making me fade!"

"Huh?" Marc turned toward her, and his eyes widened with alarm. Toffee was almost transparent.

"You were day dreaming again, weren't you?" she accused, becoming more visible. "I've warned you about that before. I can't exist unless I'm projected through your full consciousness. Now stay awake unless you want to be wrecked."

"I'm sorry," Marc said, relieved that she had already become almost com-

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pletely materialized once more. But Toffee, obviously concerned with other matters, seemed to forget the incident instantly.

"I think we're being followed," she said gravely.

"What!"

"A car turned off the highway just after we did, and has been gaining on us ever since. I've been watching it in the mirror."

MARC shifted quickly in the seat, and thrusting his head out the window, peered into the darkness, behind. Two headlights, like the eyes of a nightmare demon, stared malevolently back at him, and crept closer.

"Step on it!" he yelled. "It's probably the sheriff!" Then, suddenly, like a turtle retreating into the safety of its shell, he jerked his head back inside as a shot rang out through the still night.

"He's shooting at us!" he cried.

"Don't you think I know it?" Toffee moaned, bending low over the wheel. Then she screamed as another barking sound announced a second shot. The car began to skid drunkenly sideways.

"They've hit a tire!" she screamed. "We're out of control!"

Instantly the darkness was filled with scraping, rending sounds as the car swung crazily across the road, fell into a shallow ravine, and imbedded itself, nose-first, in the opposite embankment.

Following the musical aftermath of glass and metal showered on pavement, the ensuing stillness inside the car was almost deafening. Then, Toffee, dropping a broken steering gear daintily out of the window, turned to Marc.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so," Marc replied, without a trace of conviction.

"I don't think your car will go any more," Toffee said regretfully. "We'd better make a run for it. You'll have to get out first. My door is jammed."

Simultaneously, as though repeating a well rehearsed routine, they turned toward the door at Marc's side, then froze. Framed in the window, neither the gun nor the hand that held it looked in the least way friendly.

"I . . . I can explain everything, Sheriff," Marc stammered.

"You won't have to explain a thing," a strange voice said softly, and the hand and gun were disconcertingly joined by the pointed, sharp-featured face that Marc had seen on the beach. "All you have to do is get out and follow my instructions as I give them. It's very simple."

The face disappeared and the gun waved them out of the car.

"What . . . ?" Marc began.

"We'll talk later," the man broke in. "Right now, I'll have to ask you to blindfold each other."

His hand held out two crude, white bandages.

"Gee," Toffee giggled delightedly, accepting one of the strips. "It's just like a game isn't it?"

Marc's answering glance effortlessly hurdled years of scientific research and rendered the death ray hopelessly obsolete. His emotions, translated into words, would have required a brief but highly specialized vocabulary which he did not possess.

"You may remove your blindfolds now" the man said, and Marc and Toffee lost no time in doing so. For a moment both of them stood gaping incredulously at their new surroundings. They were standing in the center of an enormous dome-shaped room that seemed to be walled entirely with highly polished, unbroken rock; as though a small mountain had somehow been hollowed out. Except for two curved, slit-like doorways, the monotonous

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smoothness went endlessly on like perpetual motion. One door was directly before them; the other, through which they had obviously come, directly behind. Both were closed with a knobless, metallic panel. A few bits of austere, metal furniture stood here and there, looking lost in the vastness of the place. But the most unusual particular of the room was the way in which it was lighted. High in its ceiling, a fiery, sun-like ball revolved lazily, impossibly held aloft by what appeared to be two rays of strong, white light. The resulting brightness was like that one might expect to find in an unshaded meadow at high noon. Marc glanced at the contrivance and turned away blinking. It was too bright for steady scrutiny.

"You like my place?" the man asked, and his voice was the kind that crept up from behind and tapped you quietly on the shoulder. Listening to him, Marc wondered absently why Hollywood should bother with men like Peter Lorre when there were others, like the grey-haired little man, around.

TOFFEE, however, not so much interested in voices as what they were saying, gave the room a second appraising glance. "I don't think it's so screaming wonderful," she said with sledge hammer bluntness. "It might make a pretty fair dance hall, though, if you'd just tone down that silly light fixture up there."

The prideful glint in the little man's eyes went cold to be surplanted by the colorless ash of disappointment. Obviously, he had expected this to be an impressive moment.

"This," he said with battered dignity, "is a citadel of science."

"This," Toffee corrected ruthlessly, "is as nutty as a peanut stand at a county fair."

"And yet, there may be things here that will interest you intensely."

Toffee turned briefly to Marc. "I don't like the way he said that."

Apparently, the statement hadn't struck just the right note with Marc, either. He'd already turned to the little man. "Now, look here Dr. Herrigg . . . ."

"Miss Logan told you my name?"

"Miss Logan?"

"The deceased Miss Logan," the doctor elaborated.

". . . Whose body was planted in my closet," Marc completed angrily.

"That was a shame," the doctor sighed. "I'm truly sorry about all that, but it did seem the only thing to do at the time. I couldn't find you on the beach, so I had to make some hasty readjustments. You had to be gotten out of the way, and the woman's body had to be disposed of. What could be better than turning the whole problem over to the police? It all dove-tailed beautifully. After all, I have a very good reason for not wanting the police curious about my whereabouts."

"Just off hand," Marc said sourly, "I can't think of a better reason than murder. They're so apt to be high-handed about the thing."

"Exactly," the doctor agreed.

Toffee gazed disappointedly at the doctor's slight figure.

"Killers, nowadays," she murmured unhappily, "just aren't what they used to be. Maybe it's the shortages."

The doctor's eyes were heavy with exasperation as they turned toward her. "I do wish you weren't so preoccupied with murder," he said tiredly.

"You mean you're not?" Toffee returned quickly.

"Certainly not. I wouldn't have killed Mr. Epperson and Miss Logan if they hadn't forced me to. They got to prying into my private affairs, and I

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had to put an end to it somehow."

"The method seems a little extreme," Toffee pointed out. "A good, old-fashioned talking-to might have been simpler . . . or were you afraid of hurting their feelings?"

The doctor waved an impatient hand through the air.

"They were only laboratory assistants and they insisted on knowing what I was working on. So I simply obliged them. I contrived to leave a couple of capsules where they would be sure to find them. I was certain they'd both be destroyed by the blast, but that fool woman . . . she never did do anything right . . . got outside the radius of vaporization. Naturally, I had to shoot her."

"Oh, naturally," Toffee broke in. "Anyone silly enough to get outside a perfectly good radius of vaporization deserves to be shot. I see what you mean."

"If you must speak," the doctor said scornfully, "try to say something intelligent."

"Give me time," was Toffee's bland reply, "and I'll build up a really good insult for you."

"But we were talking of other things," the doctor said loftily, wagging a finger toward a group of chairs before his desk. "You'd better sit down."

HESITANTLY, Marc and Toffee accepted the invitation. Toffee crossed one lovely leg over the other and regarded it bleakly. Obviously, she thought it a waste in such scientific surroundings. Her determined belief in the idea that sex, if just given half the chance, could surmount any obstacle, seemed in grave peril of disproof. It was the first time that her faith in herself had ever been shaken, and it was not a nice feeling. She scowled at the doctor, who quickly averted his eyes. He sat down at the desk, dropped the gun on its glistening surface.

"And now," he said, shifting his attention to Marc, "I think we'd better get to the point of your visit. And just to relieve your minds, I'll tell you that you are not to be killed."

Toffee brightened.

"No," the doctor continued, "You were brought here, Mr. Pillsworth, because you are one of America's most influential advertising men. As such, you can be of use to me." He smiled wryly. "I didn't know of your profession when I placed Miss Logan in your home and knocked you out."

"You have something to advertise?" Marc asked evenly. "Don't tell me you're reopening Murder Incorporated under new management."

"No," the doctor smiled. "But I've something to advertise just the same . . . a button."

"A button?" Marc and Toffee chorused unmusically.

The doctor smiled at their surprise. "This button," he said, and he pointed to a smooth white disc set into the corner of his desk . . . an ordinary push button.

Toffee and Marc exchanged glances. Both asked questions. Neither received answers.

"I once had a plan," the doctor continued dreamily, "and I worked for years to perfect a bomb . . . a curious sort of bomb. It was to be charged with infectuous bacteria, and it could be hurled into the regions high above the earth by catapult. The result would have polluted the very heavens. All the rainfall thereafter, and eventually all the water supplies of the world would have become deadly to human life. Everyone would have died. It would have been ghastly . . . a magnificent triumph of science." He

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shrugged philosophically. "I never did get it perfected."

"Thank heaven!" Marc murmured.

The doctor smiled again, more broadly. "So I worked out something else."

"Eh?"

"Oh my, yes. Only this time I haven't failed. You remember what happened to the rock and Mr. Epperson down on the beach, Mr. Pillsworth?"

Marc nodded dumbly.

"Wouldn't it be dreadful if such a thing happened to the world? Wouldn't it be terrible if the whole world suddenly burst apart and became nothing more than a fleeting vaporous body in the universe?"

"What's he talking about?" Toffee asked frightenedly.

"I'm talking about the button, the doctor said. "Would you believe it, if I told you that I could achieve such a disaster simply by pressing that button? It would all be over in less than a second."

A HEAVY silence crashed into the room and throbbed as quietly as a battery of kettle drums in full cry, pounding on the nerves like a trip hammer. Finally, when Marc spoke, it was only to force it back by the sheer force of his voice.

"I . . . I don't believe it," he faltered.

"Are you forgetting what happened on the beach?" the doctor asked. "And besides, it doesn't matter whether you believe or disbelieve it. The point is that you are going to tell the world about it. You're going to sell the world that button for a very nice price . . . it's freedom. Either things will be done my way in this world from now on, or there'll be no world. I'm simply giving you the biggest advertising assignment of all time. You're a lucky man, Mr. Pillsworth. I shall rule the world and you shall be my spokesman."

"I . . . I don't believe it," Marc repeated doggedly. "You're lying."

"I've told you that you don't have to believe it," the doctor went on triumphantly. However, one fact remains; if I do not receive, by radio, assurances from the governments of the world, beginning within the next twenty-four hours, that they will hold all resources and manpower at my disposal, pending my wishes, I shall not hesitate to press the button. And please believe me, I have enough charged material ready that it won't leave even so much as a memory."

"Twenty-four hours!" Marc gasped.

"Mr. Pillsworth!" the doctor exclaimed. "I know your resources! And I've waited a long time for this! The fate of the world rests in your hands!"

"Yes," Toffee put in derisively. "The doctor has a right to a little fun after working so hard for so long. Don't be a kill-joy, Marc."

"But I'll be arrested for murder, the minute I show myself," Marc protested. "And who'd believe any of this, anyway? What about that?"

"Those," the doctor said wearily, spreading his long hands before him, "are your problems. I'm sure you'll find a solution to them."

Toffee rose gracefully from her chair and swung easily toward the desk. "You make it all sound so easy, doctor," she said acidly. And so startling was her movement, so distracting her lovely body in motion, that neither Marc nor the doctor noticed that, in turning, she had scooped the gun from the corner of the desk, where the doctor had dropped it. But now that they did notice, another fact was also blaringly apparent. She was pointing the gun in the wrong direction. Grasped by the muzzle, it was aimed directly at her

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own smooth midriff.

"Hands up!" she announced dramatically.

"Turn it around!" Marc yelled. "You're sticking yourself up!

"If you press that trigger," the doctor said calmly, "I'll press this button." His hand was already moving across the desk.

Marc swung quickly out of his chair, but overlooked the fact that one foot was still twisted nervously around a metallic leg. It was a disastrous oversight. The tardy foot, working in stiff opposition to his urgent forward movement, he sprawled awkwardly in mid-air, then came down, head-first, on the gleaming floor. Coming to haphazard rest, he rolled over, grinned foolishly, and closed his eyes in involuntary slumber. He was out like a cat at night.

The minute Marc's eyes closed, the gun skittered chatteringly across the floor. Toffee couldn't have held it any longer, if she'd wanted to. She'd vanished into thin air.

Dr. Herrigg stared bewilderedly at an area which, to his scientific mind, had no right to be vacant. A moment ago it had been occupied by a highly disconcerting young lady with red hair. Now, it was as empty as a rejected lover's heart. He passed a hand over his eyes, then looked again. It was still empty.

SOMETHING cool and damp struck Marc across the face, and he opened his eyes to find the doctor peering anxiously down at him, a cloth in his hand.

"Where is the girl?" he demanded.

Marc sat up and stared at him blankly, wondering the same thing. Toffee should be materialized, now that he was conscious again.

"I don't know. You haven't done anything to her?"

"Of course not. She was right here when you fell. She simply vanished."

"She must have sneaked out during the confusion," Marc said, thinking that what the doctor didn't know wouldn't hurt either of them. It was his own opinion that Toffee had materialized elsewhere and gone for help.

"But that's impossible! This place is locked electrically."

"In her way," Marc replied smilingly, "Toffee is rather scientific herself."

"Well, my men will catch her before she goes very far," the doctor said a bit more calmly. "She won't be able to get away."

"Your men?"

"Oh, I have quite a staff here."

"How do you keep them? Surely they don't approve of what you're doing?"

"They were brought here just as you were. They think they're on a very secret mission for the government, and remain as voluntary prisoners."

There was a soft, whirring sound and they both turned toward the slit-like door opposite the one through which they had come earlier. Swiftly, the metal panel shot upward to reveal a disheveled Toffee, squirming in the tremendous clutches of a large, muscular young man, whose face bore the bloody handiwork of her long, sharp fingernails. Toffee's face bore only the marks of outrage.

"Get those clammy hands off me!" she shrieked, "or I'll scratch that nasty face of yours right out of existence!"

"You already have, lady," the young man returned peevishly. "You've probably ruined it forever."

"I've done you a service then!" Toffee barked. "You should be glad to be rid of the ugly thing."

"Aw, lady," the fellow protested. "Is that any way to talk?"

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"It's one way," Toffee retorted, and apparently anxious to have an end to the matter, she silently delivered a jabbing blow to the young man's stomach.

"Oof!" was her victim's singular comment, and he immediately released her to clutch at the damaged section.

Toffee pivoted and strode into the room with queenly elegance.

"That," she announced with emphasis, "is no gentleman."

The doctor looked at her and smiled.

"Apparently you got the wrong door," he said. "Do you like my laboratory?"

"It looked like a bathroom to me," Toffee snapped. "And don't rub it in, atom brain. If I'd got out the other way, you'd be plenty washed up by the time I got through with you. Make no mistake about that!"

"But you didn't," the doctor grinned, then turned to Marc. "Now that the young lady has been recovered, and no harm done, I imagine you're anxious to get to your work? We've already wasted nearly an hour."

Marc nodded, anxious to be away from the place at any cost.

"I'll have to ask you to replace your blindfolds," the doctor said smoothly. "It's of prime importance that you do not know where this place is located. I wouldn't like to see you leading the police back here."

While the business with the blindfolds was being transacted, the forgotten young man at the door seemed to recover his vagrant breath. He straightened up and glared at Toffee.

"And you ain't no lady, either!" he proclaimed spitefully.

Toffee clawed the air blindly.

"Lead me to him!" she wailed. "Just lead me to him!"

SHERIFF MILLER looked grieved. His expression was the one of a man who had been tried beyond endurance. His eyes, as though seeking escape, darted to the darkened window, then back to the disordered couple standing before him. He tried vainly to resist a feeling that the atmosphere in the little office had gotten too heavy for the structure's thin walls. Somewhere, somehow, something would have to give way soon. And it seemed, to him, that his sanity stood a good chance of being the first to go . . . if it hadn't already.

"Now, let's have that again," he drawled, dragging his reluctant eyes back to Marc and Toffee.

"We were kidnapped," Marc began.

". . . by the man who's . . ." Toffee continued impatiently

The sheriff's hand moved for silence more swiftly than either of them had supposed it could. His eyes moved beseechingly toward the ceiling. His lips murmured a silent prayer . . . or curse.

"I know! I know!" he groaned. "By the man who's goin' to blow up the whole ding blasted world! You ain't said a word about nothin' else since my deputies come draggin' you in here. And if I have to listen to any more about it, I'm going to throw you two in jail and have the key melted down for a watch fob! It is the craziest thing I ever heard of in all my whole natural life."

"*Natural* life?" Toffee exclaimed acidly. "He calls life with a face like that natural! If that's nature, I'll take tobasco!"

"What's the matter with my face?" the sheriff asked belligerently.

"What isn't! Just look at that moth-eaten mustache!"

"Stop that!" Marc put in crisply. "We haven't time to haggle over the sheriff's mustache! We've only got twenty-two hours left!"

Injured at having been brought to account by his own prisoner, the sheriff

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turned vengeful eyes on Marc.

"You're in here fer murder!" he snapped.

"I've got to get to a telephone!" Marc pleaded desperately.

"If you think you're goin' to make me think you're crazy so's you can plead insanity," the sheriff snorted, "you're . . . you're . . . crazy!"

"Make up your mind, Sheriff," Toffee said demurely.

"Why did you kill 'er?" the sheriff thundered suddenly, leering at Marc.

"I didn't."

"Her body with in your closet!"

"So was yours," Toffee giggled.

The sheriff shuddered and passed a moist hand over an equally moist face, leaving both face and mustache matchingly droopy. He gazed smoldering at Toffee for a moment, then turned his attention resolutely to Marc.

"If you didn't kill 'er, who did?"

"Dr. Herrigg."

". . . the man who's going to blow up the world," Toffee elaborated innocently.

The sheriff's huge hand came down thunderingly on the desk.

"That rips 'er!" he screamed. "That cops the cast iron feather duster!" He turned excitedly to one side. "George! George!"

A small, musty rustic emerged from the shadows and shuffled to the sheriff's side. "Yep, Mort?" he queried sadly. "What's up?"

"They are!" the sheriff thundered, pointing a long, gnarled finger dramatically at the captives. "Up fer life, I hope! Lock 'em up. Get 'em out of my sight afore I throttle the both of 'em with my own bare hands!"

George cast baleful, faded eyes at his two charges and nodded toward a door at the rear of the room. "Come along peaceable," he quavered. "The man'll have to bunk in with the drunk in number one." He looked at Toffee with a smile that was only a ghost of itself. "You can have a cell all to yourself, miss. We've got two."

Toffee cast a hopeful glance toward the street door, but instead of finding a possible path to freedom, it encountered only what appeared to be a solid wall of gaying mouths and goggling eyes. The villagers, currently looking like an assortment of strangling guppies in an over-crowded aquarium, had turned out to see the murderers; rare things in their quiet town. A low whistle issued from the staring group as Toffee moved into full view.

"Sure hot out tonight, ain't it?" a rural humorist commented sweetly, turning away.

MARC watched dolefully as the drunk, a dapper little man, bearing the mark of elegance in distress . . . and alcoholism in over-abundance . . . tottered uncertainly across the cell and clung eagerly to the bars. Blinking, he peered at Toffee in the opposite cell. "My wife would kill me," he murmured thickly. "Now I'm seein' redheaded dames!"

Across the aisle, Toffee looked up quickly, the overhead light falling sharply across her vivid face. "Look out who you're calling a dame!" she snapped. "You sodden little alcoholic. Why don't you become anonymous?"

"Geez!" the fellow breathed wonderingly. "She talks! I could hear her just as plain! She talks kinda mean, but she's got a real nice voice."

"Don't let it go to your head," Marc warned sourly. "She'll talk to anyone. She'd even pass the time of day with Jack the Ripper if she had the chance."

"Better than drunks," Toffee commented dryly.

"Don't you like liquor?" the little man asked worriedly.

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"Not from a distance. Please breathe out the window."

Obediently, the fellow lurched toward the tiny cell window and perched his chin on it's sill. "Like this?" he asked, anxious to please.

"Much obliged," Toffee rewarded him. "That helps a little." She turned anxiously to Marc. "How are we going to get out of here?" she asked.

"We wouldn't be in here in the first place," Marc lamented bitterly, "If that half-witted Herrig hadn't dropped us right into their laps."

"I guess he thought you wanted to be near the telegraph office. It's just our luck that the jail turned up right next door." Her expression became deeply thoughtful. "Do you think he can really do what he says?"

"How should I know? But I do think we're likely to find out. Even if I manage to get out of here in time, no one will ever believe me. I wouldn't believe it myself. What was down in the laboratory?"

"Oh, nothing much. The usual collection of miscellaneous wires and wheels and tubes. There was just one thing, though. You remember that lighting gadget in the upper room?"

Marc nodded that he remembered.

"Well, there was another of those downstairs, only larger and nearer the floor. I walked right into one of those white beams that hold it up."

"What happened?"

"Nothing really," Toffee went on. "The ball stopped turning. I guess it would have fallen if I'd broken the beam entirely. When I stepped out, it started revolving again, just as before, only in the opposite direction. That's when that pie-faced gorilla grabbed me."

It wasn't much of a revelation; it didn't leave much room for discussion, and at its conclusion the little cell block became very quiet. The heavy, dewy breathing of the little drunk gave the atmosphere a sort of sad, sighing quality. It was Toffee who finally put an end to it.

"Oh," she said. "I forget something."

"Huh?" Marc grunted.

"I forgot something," Toffee repeated, and immodestly she thrust a searching finger into the upper portion of her brief costume. She looked like a distressed woman who had falsified her figure only to discover that certain attachments, in spite of their manufacturer's claims, are not always trustworthy. It was a moment of breathless suspense.

"Stop that!" Marc yelled. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I found something in the laboratory," Toffee said, her curious search leading her into a series of writhing motions of a very suggestive nature. "I put it away for safe keeping."

"In . . . in your . . .?"

"Yes," Toffee answered quickly. "After all, I don't have any pockets, you know."

"What was it?"

"Something small and white . . . and cold, at first," Toffee panted, snappily shifting hips.

"A capsule?" Marc yelled.

"What's a capsule?" Toffee gasped impatiently. "Don't bother me with silly questions at a time like this. I know the thing is here somewhere."

THE drunk turned eagerly away from the window. His eyes became brilliantly alight, and a grin of sheerest delight spread over his face.

"Turn on the blue lights!" he chortled, then followed the exclamation with an offensively shrill whistle.

"Keep your low notions to yourself," Toffee snapped, pushing back a mop

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of red hair that had fallen rakishly over one eye. "Things are bad enough without you getting smutty about it all. I'm only looking for something."

"Ain't nothing missing that I can see," the drunk giggled.

"Hit him Marc!" Toffee yelled. "Smack that evil-minded little ogre!"

"Can't you get along without all that squirming?" Marc pleaded. "Where's your sense of modesty?"

"I don't know," Toffee returned. "But wherever it is, I'll bet it's getting a darned good jolting around."

Then suddenly the performance stopped.

"It's no use," Toffee said. "I've got this thing on too tight, and the thing's hiding where I can't get at it. I'll have to loosen things up a bit."

"Lord love me!" gasped the evil minded little ogre. "If she loosens up much more, she'll be spread out like a picnic lunch."

"Slug him, Marc!"

"We'll close our eyes," Marc compromised. "I'll keep my hand over his."

"All right," Toffee agreed, "but if the dirty little devil tries to peek, hammer him down to the floor! Cut him off at the ankles!"

With Marc's promise that the evil-minded little ogre, more recently a nasty little devil, should be served in his prime in case of peeking, the loosening up proceeded in good order. Turning her back, and bending over, Toffee began to shake her shapely torso in a manner that vividly recalled the palmier days of Gilda Grey. It was in this provocative moment that George, the ancient keeper of the keys, stirred by the sound of loud voices, hove onto the scene. Stopping short at the first glimpse of the quaking Toffee, he flushed a deep crimson and turned his faded eyes modestly away.

"You gotta stop that, lady," he whimpered. "It ain't decent, and this is a respectable jail. The sheriff don't like that sort of thing goin' on here."

"Go away!" Toffee yelled distractedly, clutching wildly at her dress. "Get out of here!"

"I ain't gonna leave 'til you promise not to do that any more. It ain't nice." He pointed to Marc and the drunk, still standing starkly still, their eyes clamped determinedly shut. "Just look what you're doin' to them poor boys over there, lady. You ain't gettin' nowhere with them. Their eyes is shut. And look at the big one helpin' the little one to keep from lookin' out."

"Yes!" Toffee exclaimed hotly. "I had to practically threaten those 'poor boys' with disfigurement to get them to do it! Now, you get out of here before I start whooping it up all over the lot. I'll tell people you made improper advances."

Instantly, George's face exchanged it's embarrassed redness for a terrified pallor. He knew when he was licked. He turned and fled from the room.

"I'm goin' to call the sheriff," he threatened distantly. "He's goin' to be awful mad when he learns what's goin' on."

Unconcernedly, Toffee continued her startling operations just where she'd left off. Almost immediately a small, white pellet appeared at her feet. Hastily, she readjusted her appropriated draperies and picked it up.

"I've got it!" she called, and the distraught statues in the opposite cell immediately came to life.

"Let's see it!" Marc yelled excitedly.

"Just a minute," Toffee replied. "Wait 'til I get it open. I want to see what's inside."

"Don't!" Marc screamed. "It'll blow up! Throw it over here, to me."

"Oh, all right," Toffee agreed reluctantly. "Here it comes."

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Like a bullet dispelled from a gun that was anxious to be rid of it's burden, the capsule shot across the aisle, and in spite of Marc's frantic clutching gestures, cracked sharply against an unrelenting iron bar. Then, it dropped back, into the center of the passage.

Marc turned dazedly to Toffee, opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. The tiny jail was suddenly all smoke, flame and blackness, more or less in that order, and it's surprised inmates were suffering the eerie sensation of having the floor treacherously snatched from beneath their very feet.

ELEVATING his nose from it's uncomfortable position astride a cold, iron bar, Marc glanced unbelieving at the devastation about him. The jail was a shattered shambles, and well ventilated in the extreme. Here and there, ghostly pockets of smoke were arising slowly through beams of moonlight. Somewhere behind him, there was the sound of an iron door being flung aside, and sitting up, he looked around.

"Damn!" Toffee said with elegant profanity. "My dress is a mess."

"The jail hasn't been improved much, either," Marc observed. "You hurt?"

"Of course not!" Toffee said, obviously surprised that anyone should ever think of her as anything but indestructible. "I'm still intact."

A dreadful moaning sounded from deep under a pile of debris, and Toffee turned, stepped over the door that was hanging undecidedly by a single bent hinge, and leaned forward in a listening attitude.

"What is it?" Marc asked. "It sounds like a lost soul."

"It is," Toffee said. "It's your drunken cell mate. He's giving voice."

"I wish he wouldn't be so damned generous with it. He's fairly lavishing voice."

"Must be down pretty deep," Toffee mused. "We can't leave him there."

"Why not?"

"I don't know for sure," Toffee replied uncertainly. "But I'm pretty certain it isn't just the thing to do." She started in the general direction of the noise. "Take heart!" she called. "We're coming!"

"Don't bother!" the voice called back weakly. "It's not very nice down here. You wouldn't like it at all. Just pass down a bottle and go away."

When the last armful of bars had finally been cast melodiously aside, and the little man freed, he regarded Marc levelly, without thanks.

"You didn't have to hit me," he said reproachfully. "I didn't peek much."

"We blew up!" Toffee explained proudly. She waved an arm significantly at a sizable hole in the wall. The fact that the ceiling was almost entirely gone seemed to escape her notice. "Let's go!"

The drunk, an amiable soul, even if a lost one, accepted the explanation without question and smiled agreeably.

"Okay," he said. "Let's take my car and go somewhere. There's some liquor left in it I think." He turned to Marc apologetically. "No offense, old man?"

"None at all," Marc replied absently.

The fellow extended his hand formally and said, "I'm Harold Jenks. Harold J. Jenks, the plumber."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Jenks," Marc said impatiently, anxious to be going. "My name is Dracula. This is my girl friend, Mad Agnes."

"Please to meet *you*, Mr. Dracula," Harold said with careful politeness.

"Heaven help me!" Marc exclaimed desperately. "Let's get out of here!"

And like three spectors, freshly risen from the grave, they filed silently out into the cool quietness of the night.

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Toffee looked back sadly.

"It wasn't such a bad little jail," she said with becoming sentiment.

"No, it wasn't," Harold agreed thickly. "I've been in a lot worse."

MARC at the wheel, the delivery truck sped down the silvery, moonlit highway, heralding to a slumbering countryside that the services of Harold J. Jenks could be obtained by the very simple operation of calling 23-J. This lie was blatantly blazoned on the side of the vehicle in impressive gilt letters. As for Harold J. Jenks, himself, far from standing ready to rush to the aid of housewives in moist distress, he was, at the moment, behind those very letters in the company of Toffee and an assortment of suspicious looking bottles, and caroling at the top of his lungs. The two of them, joined together in absolute discord, were engaged in a frightful recital of bawdy ballads, each new selection seeming to rival its forerunner for sheer obscenity. Marc, long since giving up any hope of restraining this wild party, tried merely not to listen to it. And things might have gone on in this disquieting fashion all night if the truck hadn't unexpectedly coughed, sputtered, then lavished it's last gasp on an asthmatic halt.

"What's the matter?" Toffee asked, dropping out of the current vocal massacre long enough to peer owlishly over the back of the seat. "Why stop?"

"We're out of gas," Marc replied. And it was a curse.

"Where are we?" Harold muttered weakly from the darker reaches of the merchandise compartment. "Is there any liquor nearby?"

Mare thrust his head out of the window, then drew it slowly back. "We're opposite the beach house," he replied disgustedly, "right where we started."

"Is there any liquor there?" Harold asked. "We're running low."

"Don't I know it!" Marc growled peevishly. "They don't run any lower than you two. At least you could have told me we needed gas. The sheriff will be catching up with us any minute now, and he'll probably string us up this time. He might forgive a little murder, but blowing up his jail is a serious matter.

Harold lapsed unconcernedly into discordant melody once more, but this time he was not joined by Toffee.

"We'd better get out of here," she said. "Let's hide in the house."

"We can't go there. It's full of cops."

"Well, at least we can hide in the woods."

"We'll have to," Marc nodded. "Drag that answer to a distiller's prayer out of there and let's go. I think those lights back there on the bend belong to the sheriff's car."

WHEN they were safely in the woods, and Harold had been persuaded that his future would be more secure without melodic profanity . . . even a rendition of "The Old Pine Tree," especially suited to the occasion . . . Marc turned his atention to the road. The sheriff's car was already beside the delivery truck.

"What are they doing?" Toffee hissed.

"Searching the truck."

"Won't do 'em any good," Harold chuckled softly. "There isn't any more liquor in it."

"They're leaving now," Marc called back. "They're headed for the house. I guess they think we're up there."

"Good," said Toffee. "That gives us more time, anyway."

"More time for what?" Marc asked, turning toward her and slumping dejectedly against a tree. "What can we

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do out here in these woods?"

"I don't know," Toffee said reflectively. "But I feel something in the back of your subconscious that's trying to break through. If I just concentrate a minute, I may get it. It has something to do with these woods, I think. Try to make your mind a blank. That'll help a lot in establishing a contact. I could knock you out," she suggested, "and return there."

"I'll just make my mind a blank," Marc answered hastily.

And for a time a heavy silence fell over the trio.

"Are these pine trees?" Toffee asked finally, breaking the quiet.

"Good grief!" Marc groaned. "I concentrate myself almost into a coma to make my mind a blank for you, and all you do is wonder about the scenery.'

"No, no," Toffee said, fluttering a hand delicately. "That's what I got from your subconscious; a memory of the scent of pines . . . if that's what they are. You smelled them when you were blindfolded . . . the first time."

"I don't remember it."

"Of course you don't. You were too busy thinking about other things with your conscious mind. But your subconscious recorded it, and it's still there. It was after Dr. Herrigg stopped the car and we all got out."

"But we walked for half an hour after that.

"I know. But at least we know where we started from. The memory was very strong when we came into these woods. We must have been just about here. The atmosphere is identical. There was also the sound of the sea. We walked away from it. Where would you be if you walked half an hour straight into these woods?"

"At a swamp clearing. But there isn't anything there."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. It's part of my property."

"There's something else," Toffee said slowly. "We heard the ocean again, just before we arrived at Herrigg's laboratory. So we couldn't have walked back into the woods. We must have gone somewhere else."

"But we traveled straight ahead," Marc objected. "We didn't turn."

"Are you sure this isn't a peninsula? We might have walked across it."

"No," Marc said firmly. "We couldn't have done that. The cliff juts out into the ocean, but it wouldn't take more than a few minutes to cross it."

"I know what happened!" Toffee cried. "We *did* turn! We never *stopped* turning. We walked in a circle through these very woods. Even people who aren't blindfolded often walk in circles when they think they're going straight. At least they do in forests. Herrigg was purposely throwing us off the track!"

"I think you are right!" Marc exclaimed enthusiastically. "Maybe we'll stop Herrigg yet!" Then the excitement suddenly died from his voice. "But if we traveled in a circle," he said, "we should be at Herrigg's place now. There's nothing near here but the beach house."

"But we were closer to the ocean than this," Toffee argued. "We were right next to it."

"The beach?"

"I don't think so," Toffee reflected. "We went downward, but not on a wooden stairway. It must have been on the other side of the cliff."

"But we couldn't have gone down there. It's a sheer drop."

"But we did," Toffee insisted. "We were inside or under that cliff. I'm dead sure of it. At least we can't lose anything by looking."

"Nothing but our lives," Marc com-

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mented dryly. "And as things stand, that's next to nothing." He crossed to Harold, who was currently drowsing, and grasped him by the shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Let's go."

Harold opened one doggy eye and gazed up hopefully. "We going to get some grog?" he asked foggily.

MARC stopped and looked back over his shoulder. From where the three of them were standing in the sloping tunnel, he could not see the entrance, but the faint, luminous glow of reflected moonlight marked it's probable location. Also, it gave the passage an eerie, under-water appearance.

"We've come quite a distance," he whispered. "We must be almost level with the ocean by now. I wondered how Herrigg ever found this place. It looked like an ordinary wash-out from the highway."

Toffee tugged at his sleeve. "He probably built it that way himself," she hissed. "Let's keep going."

"Reminds me of a downstairs saloon in Omaha," Harold put in with a misguided attempt at sociability. "You go down this little passage, and . . ."

There was a sudden, soft slapping sound, and Harold became strangely mute.

"We'll hear about your disreputable meanderings some other time," Toffee said menacingly.

And, for a time, they traveled on in silence.

Then, as they rounded a bend in the tunnel, Toffee, who had self-appointedly taken the lead, suddenly darted back, and forced Marc and Harold back against the rough, rocky wall.

"Take it easy," Harold complained. "You trying to split my head open?"

"I couldn't stand the fumes," Toffee retorted. "I think he saw me."

"Who?" hissed Marc. "Who saw you?"

"There's an open space down there," Toffee whispered. "And there's a guard standing in it. I saw him silhouetted against the ocean. He may have been looking right at me."

Suddenly the little party froze as a voice echoed through the tunnel.

"Geez, Mac!" it said. "Did you see that, up in the passage, just now?"

"Nope," came the voice of Mac. "Didn't see a thing."

"I did," the voice went on wonderingly. "I could have sworn I saw a beautiful redheaded angel. She was walking straight for me, just as pretty as you please. She looked kinda half-naked."

"Oh, is that all it was?" Mac returned disappointedly. "I see things like that ever once in awhile. They come and go, those angels. You've just been down here too long. You'll get over it. They go away after a time."

"I don't want to get over it," the voice said positively. "Not when I'm seeing dames like that!"

"Dames!" Toffee breathed hotly. "I'll show that blockhead who's a dame!"

"Hold on!" Marc rasped, placing a restraining hand on her arm. "If they think you're an apparition, let's not disillusion them. Get out there in that patch of moonlight and try to look ethereal . . . if it's possible . . . while Harold and I sneak up on them from the shadows." He swung about and mistrustingly confronted the weaving Harold. "Grab a rock," he directed. "We're going to tuck them in for the night."

"Going to play a trick, eh?" Harold winked happily, grabbing an undersized boulder. "I'm just crazy about tricks." And staggering under his burden of liquor and rock, he started after Marc, who was already moving cautiously

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along the shadowed wall.

SLOWLY, rhythmically, Toffee moved into the moonlight, her arms swaying gracefully over her head. In the diffused, silver spotlight, she looked more like a lovely other-world figure than any halucination would ever dare.

"Yipes!" a voice, Mac's, breathed worshipfully. "Look, Walt! Now I'm seeing it. This is the best one yet."

"Yeah," whispered Walt, apparently overcome. "She's too beautiful to be true. I wish she were real."

The angel was strangely responsive to flattery. It renewed it's efforts.

"Wow!" Walt moaned happily. "It's the first time I ever had a vision that did a strip tease! This is better than a show!"

Instantly, as though to punctuate the remark, there were two almost simultaneous thuds, and Toffee's enthusiastic audience, looking like bobby soxers at a Frank Sinatra matinee, tumbled blissfully to the ground.

"Stop that! Marc rasped, stepping over one of the slumbering guards, "Can't you do anything without taking off your clothes?"

"Yes," Toffee snickered wickedly. "But it isn't much fun. Did you have to knock them out so soon? I was only getting started."

"Never mind," Marc growled. "We've got to concentrate on getting to Herrigg. The entrance must be near here. Do you see a panel anywhere?"

"It's probably disguised," Toffee offered. "When that ape grabbed me, he just rubbed his hand over the wall to open the door. We might try rubbing this wall and see what happens. It may be an invisible beam that has to be broken at close range."

"Anything's worth a try," Marc answered, and accordingly, advanced to the wall and began running his hands swiftly in both directions.

For a time the little party clawed silently at the wall like a trio of demented sand crabs. It was doubtful that Harold really knew the purpose of this activity, but he joined in with great good will. Finally, their industry came to an end as Marc spoke:

"I think I've got it," he whispered. "There's a smooth spot over here."

Even as he spoke, a sudden flash of bright light fell over them as a slit appeared in the side of the cliff, to reveal the familiar dome-like room. Marc stole back for another look at the guards, and finding them still unconscious, returned swiftly to the door.

"Is Herrigg there?" he asked, approaching Toffee.

"I don't see him," Toffee answered. "I think the room's empty."

They crept forward. Toffee was right; the room was deserted. Removing his jacket, Marc moved into the passage again, and by hanging the garment on a jagged rock, managed to cover the smooth surface that opened the door.

"We don't want to be trapped in here," he explained, returning inside. Then he nodded to Toffee. "Keep an eye on the guards."

"Okay," she agreed. "What are you going to do?"

"Look for Herrigg," Marc replied, "and try to get the jump on him."

He didn't have to look far, for almost instantly there was a soft, whirring sound that announced the opening of the laboratory door. Marc dashed swiftly toward it and stood to one side. Toffee crossed to the open doorway and dissolved into it's shadows. She motioned frantically to Harold, still in the center of the room, but in answer, he only blinked and swayed undecidedly from side to side, obviously blinded by the bright light.

The door slid open and Dr. Herrigg

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stepped into the room. Whatever he had expected to find, it is certain that an alcoholic plumber was not among those items, for instantly, at the sight of Harold, he stopped short, stunned. Indeed, so acute was his surprise that he didn't notice Marc, almost next to him. The gun seemed to appear magically in the doctor's hand as he advanced slowly toward the befogged Harold. Harold, for his part, gazed uncertainly at the shocked scientist and greeted him with mistaken enthusiasm.

"Got a shot, Doc?" he asked hopefully.

IT WAS at this precise moment that Marc sprang after the doctor. Leaping lightly forward, he grasped Herrigg's upper arms firmly and pulled them sharply behind the startled man. There was a quick barking sound, and a bullet whined thinly over Harold's head, then ricochetted from the solid, circular wall. As the gun clattered to the floor, Harold followed it's example, and dropped to his knees, looking much like a terrified, repentent sinner at a revival.

"Cripes, Doc!" he muttered feverishly. "You got it all wrong. All I want is a drink!"

'Grab that gun!" Marc panted, holding the furiously struggling doctor. "Cover him!"

Toffee, like an Olympic runner in the last stretch, darted swiftly from the shadows and scooped the weapon from the floor. This time she held it correctly.

"Stand back!" she yelled blood thirstily, slipping into what she believed to be the spirit of the occasion. "I'll blow his ugly head off!"

The doctor, unexpectedly confronted by this chilling display of feminine willingness to mayhem, became instantly docile. "Don't shoot!" he pleaded.

Marc released him and moved toward Toffee. He took the gun from her and held it levely on Herrigg. "Let's go, Herrigg," he said. "Let's join the sheriff."

"You can't do this!" the doctor protested frantically. "You can't!"

"No?" Marc asked, nodding toward the door. "Just step right this way."

There was a general movement toward the outer passage, but it was suddenly arrested like an abrupt foot-fall in the dark that had reached for a stairway too soon. The party, quarry and hunters alike, suddenly froze, as a wild baying echoed weirdly through the outer tunnel.

"Monsters!" Toffee screamed with sincerest terror.

And in the next moment it seemed that she was right. Two sets of fiendish, glowing eyes appeared in the doorway, and below them, in appropriate places, were two wide, slavering mouths. This paralyzing spectacle was presently explained, though made no more lovely, as the eyes and mouths, advancing, proved to be the formidable property of two giant bloodhounds. They were straining against a couple of taut chain leashes at who's ends was a single, mammoth hand. It was the hand of Sheriff Miller. He surveyed the transfixed party with triumphant eyes.

"Here they are boys!" he called out loudly. "Come and get 'em!"

The call was greeted by the additional, and no more reassuring appearance of three deputies, all of uniform and unbelievable proportions. One of them carried a gun of distant, but nonetheless dangerous, vintage.

"Which one we after, Mort?" one of them asked in a voice that sounded as though it was being dragged through a gravel pit.

The sheriff pointed to Marc. "That

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tall, murderous buzzard," he drawled.

Dr. Herrigg, seeing his deliverance at hand, glanced eagerly toward the desk, the button on it's corner. Marc, realizing that he had lost his advantage, started forward.

"There's your murderer!" he cried, pointing a trembling finger at the doctor, and praying that the sheriff would believe him. He still had his gun, and intended using it if Herrigg made a move. The doctor seemed to sense this and remained tentatively where he was.

"I don't know what he's talking about," he said suavely. "This man is obviously suffering from a mental disorder."

"Don't believe him!" Marc yelled. "Ask him about his laboratory.

The sheriff looked baffled. He rubbed his free hand slowly over the back of his neck. It seemed an hour before the act had been completed, and he said, "Grab 'em both boys. Hold 'em quiet 'til we find out what this is all about."

The "boys" did as they were told with a little more efficiency, it seemed, than was absolutely necessary.

"And now," the sheriff said unhurriedly, "I might's well tell you two, if either of you make a move, we'll just have to fix you for good."

IN DISAGREEMENT with these new developments, Toffee started determinedly forward, but suddenly stopped short as the bloodhounds turned toward her and snarled. She'd seen hungry glances directed at her legs before, but never any quite so terrifyingly hungry as these. The sheriff regarded her lazily.

"I'd sure hate to see a pretty girl like you get all chewed up and spit out," he said with genuine sadness. "But if you make another move, I'm afraid I just won't be able to hold the hounds no longer. They ain't had a lot to eat lately."

Toffee glanced nervously at the great, hulking beasts, and didn't make another move. The sheriff directed his attention to Marc's captor.

"Keep a sharp eye on that 'un, Fred," he said. "He's pretty desperate."

"Meantime, Harold, forgotten and ignored in the background, was beginning to feel a bit left out of things. He started vaguely forward.

"I'm pretty desperate too," he said jarringly.

Surprised, everyone turned in unison to look at the woozy little fellow.

"I'm Hypo Hal," Harold went on theatrically, delighted by such unanimous attention and reluctant to loose it. "I think I'll make a confession or two."

He swaggered importantly across the room to the desk, and sitting on it's edge, glanced back to check the setting. "What's this?" he asked absently, jabbing a finger toward the button on the corner.

"Don't!" screamed Marc. And with a sudden motion of his shoulders, he lurched free of the deputy's heavy grasp.

"Get 'im, Fred!" the sheriff bellowed.

In the furious moment that followed, Marc was briefly aware of just two things. The first was a Gargantuan fist, moving swiftly into his face; the second . . . and most alarming . . . was Harold's finger, pressing firmly down on the white button Both made contact in the same dreadful instant.

There was a sudden, terrifying burst of white, white light, then complete, roaring darkness.

MARC felt the floor go fluid under his feet. Then the swirling tide caught him up, and he was spiraling downward, into the deep blackness of a gigantic whirlpool. Nearer and near-

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er the pointed, thrashing center he moved, but he did not struggle against it. Somehow, he was suddenly too weary to care. He relaxed and let himself be born along in the racing, circling current.

The journey ended just as it reached its twisting, turning climax. Deposited lightly on a soft, velvety surface, Marc lay perfectly still for a moment, savoring a strange feeling of quiet contentment. Slowly, he opened his eyes and gazed out at the muted greenness of the quiet little valley. He ran an eager hand over the grass. It was as soft and fine as rabbit's fur. With a contented sigh, he rolled over. Then he sat up abruptly.

The pert, vivid face that was lowered to his, was familiar. Also, it was irritated in expression. Dangerously so.

"What's the big idea?" Toffee demanded hotly.

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean! Just listen to him! You know very well what I mean. Shoving me back into your subconscious just when things really get exciting!"

Marc glanced questioningly around.

"We're in the valley of your obnoxious mind," Toffee explained ungraciously. "Now I'll have to go back to work, putting away that stupid miscellaneous information. And what trash it is! It's what I get for taking the job in an inferior mind. I should have held out for a decent intellect."

"I'm sorry," Marc murmured, too cowed to argue.

The anger immediately faded from Toffee's puckish features. She fell to her knees beside him.

"I'm sorry I said that, Marc," she said with unaccustomed gentleness. "I didn't mean it. I wouldn't be anyone else's subconscious manifestation for anything in the world. I swear it!"

"World!" The word struck a responsive chord in Marc's memory. "I've got to get back!" he cried, jumping to his feet.

"Not until you kiss me goodbye," Toffee insisted, rising after him.

Cool lips and whirling dizziness often went hand in hand, but never as when the lips involved were Toffee's. Suddenly, the valley had begun to spin, and Marc felt himself being lifted upward. There was a dreadful rush of wind, and Toffee was torn from his embrace. A moment later, as through the roar of a tumulluous ocean, her voice reached him faintly.

"Don't forget!" she was calling. "Don't forget that I'm always waiting here, in the back of your mind. I'm always here, Marc!"

Marc attempted a reply, but the screaming wind forced the words back into his throat. He tried not to notice that the light was growing dim; that a heavy blackness was drawing close around him, everywhere.

MARC opened his eyes, and cautiously felt his jaw. It hurt. Taking this in stride, he directed his attention to his surroundings. He was propped up against the passage wall in a more-or-less, back-of-the-neck, sitting position. From the opening at the end, he could see that the half-light of early morning was reaching in to waste a delicate, silvery outline on an immense pile of rocky wreckage. There was a scraping sound behind him, and he turned.

"You finally wake up?" the sheriff drawled, moving toward him. "Might's well tell you right now, you ain't hurt none, so's you won't worry."

Marc started to his feet.

"You don't have to run from me no more," the sheriff said. "You're in the clear. Herrigg told us all about the

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murder; how he shot the woman and put 'er in your house. We ain't after you no more."

Marc relaxed.

"Where is everyone?" he asked. "What happened?"

"They've all went," the sheriff said uneasily. "Everyone 'cept you and me . . . and one other."

"One other?"

"Yeah," the sheriff went on hesitantly. "The . . . the girl. She didn't get out when the blast went off, I guess. We looked fer 'er, but didn't have no luck. I'm sorry to be the one to tell it to you. She was such a pretty little thing. But I guess she's happier where she is, if it comforts you to think so."

"Yes. I guess so," Marc replied, smiling wryly. His eyes became reflective. "What about the doctor?"

"Well, I ain't so sure about him. He acted all right while we was talkin' about the murder, but soon's we brought up about this place down here and the rig he had in 'er, it seems like he just went plumb outa his head. He kept mumblin' something about somebody breakin' some sort of beam and reversin' a mechanism. Kept yellin' that it caused the earth to get itself all uncharged, whatever that means. And he called that poor little girl names 'til you just wouldn't believe it." The sheriff paused and gazed intently at Marc. "You got any idea what he was goin' on about?"

Marc considered the question for a long moment. "No, I haven't," he said finally. "I haven't any idea at all."

"You was ravin' about him blowin' up the world, last night."

"I guess I was just excited," Marc replied evasively.

"That's what I thought at the time."

Marc got slowly to his feet, and tried his legs. They were a little stiff but still serving their purpose.

"What about the laboratory?" he asked.

"Blew to kingdom come," the sheriff replied. "Ain't nothin' left of 'er. Guess we'll never know what was goin' on in 'er. We got the men out of 'er all right, but they didn't know much about what they was here for."

Marc nodded and started slowly up the passage. He was anxious to be away from the place.

"I think I'd like to get back to the house," he said, "if you don't mind."

"Don't mind at all," the sheriff answered amiably, following after him. "As a matter of fact, I feel a little foolish about chasin' you around like I did. But after you locked me up and blasted my jail house, I guess it wasn't my fault I thought you was a desperado."

When they reached the top of the cliff and stepped out onto the highway, Marc had to close his eyes a moment against the bright morning sun. He shook his head. At first there was a sharp pain, but when it had passed he felt better. He opened his eyes again, started to turn to the sheriff, then did a quick double-take toward the beach house. His eyes grew wide with disbelief.

A blue convertible was standing pertly in the drive.

WITHOUT a word of explanation, Marc ran eagerly across the highway and toward the house, leaving the sheriff to his own reflections on the daftness of city folk.

"Julie! Julie!" he cried, reaching the path. And in the next instant he nearly stumbled as he saw his wife, cool, blonde and radiant as ever, move gracefully through the front door and smile down at him from the tiny terrace. Then, somehow, she was in his arms.

"When did you get here?" Marc

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asked when he could.

"Just fifteen minutes ago," Julie said cheerfully. "I drove all night to get here. I had no idea you'd be at the beach so early. I thought I'd have to drag you out of bed." She sighed contentedly. "I just couldn't stand another day without you. I just couldn't face it."

"What about the separate vacations?"

Julie's eyes became wide and innocent. "What are those?" she asked.

"All over it?"

She nodded, flushed just a little.

Through their conversation, Marc had been vaguely aware of a man's voice within the house. It seemed excited.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Oh, that!" Julie laughed. "It's the radio!" She looked suddenly excited, as though having just remembered something important. "You should just hear what's going on! It's absolutely fantastic!"

"Going on?"

"Yes. It's the strangest thing. Early this morning there was some sort of disturbance all through the earth's surface. In some places, it was so severe, it knocked down whole buildings. I really don't understand it very well, but at first they thought it was just an earthquake, but scientists proved somehow that it couldn't have been. Now, they've decided that it must have been some sort of weird bombardment from another planet . . . Mars or the moon, or one of those places. Russia even claims to be holding Orson Welles responsible.

"Anyway, the most amazing things have been happening ever since! Already, they've formed a World Army in case of further attacks. And everyone's talking about a United World. They're really sincere about it, too. The world has really become united in just the last few hours. It's odd how swiftly these things can be accomplished when they really get down to it. They've settled matters that no one ever thought they'd agree on. It's almost unbelievable. It seems we just had to have some sort of outside threat to pull us all together."

"Are you sure about all that?" Marc asked.

"Oh, yes!" Julie nodded positively. "Some places got a real jolting." She drew closer to him. "I'm so glad you weren't in any of them," she went on softly. "I'm so thankful you were safe here, where nothing ever happens . . . where you could have a nice, quiet vacation."

Marc's mouth flew widely open, then snapped shut. Grinning, he slipped an arm about Julie's waist and pulled her gently toward the house.

"So am I," he said quietly.

THE END

★ FINGER RING MAGIC ★

By H. R. STANTON

JASPER, set in a ring, was supposed to be much better than any other stone for its healing power. This power was strengthened if it were set in a silver, instead of a gold, setting. Claudius Galen, a Greek physician and medical writer recommended jasper set in a ring and engraved with the figure of a man wearing a bunch of herbs around his neck, as protection against evil and illness.

The diamond was given magical properties long before it was used as a stone for wedding and engagement rings. Some thought it was endowed with divine virtues, and that if it were worn near the heart it would dissuade enemies and drive out fears, or prevent a person from swooning. A diamond was supposed to drive away the vanity of dreams or nightmares, or prevent a person from being poisoned.

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Certain kinds of rubies could restrain the wrath of enemies or unreasonable friends.

Jacinth and hyacinth were said to be able to induce sleep if worn in a finger ring.

The emerald was a symbol of purity and some thought it would break if touched by the skin of an adulterer. Others said that wearing an emerald could sharpen your wits so you could amass a fortune, and that you could look into the future.

Topaz was believed to free men from passion if they wished, and also from melancholia. If the emerald should be thrown into scalding water, it could suddenly turn it cold.

The agate was good protection against poisons. Men thought that the eagle kept an agate in her nest to protect the young from being bitten by venomous creatures.

The sapphire could put the wearer in favor with princes and pacify enemies, free him from enchantments, bonds and imprisonment, and soften the wrath of God. It is said to be able to keep men pure and therefore is worn by holy men.

The opal could sharpen the sight of its wearer and dim the eyes of all those who stood in his way.

The cornelian gave the man that wore it a cheerful heart free from fear, and full of daring, and was also very good protection against witchcraft and fascination.

Turquoise if worn in a gold ring will prevent injury from falls by taking the bruises and harm into itself.

THE MALE WOMAN

By JON BARRY

IT WASN'T till World War II that women doctors achieved the right to join the United States Army and Medical Corps on an equal basis as to pay and rank with their male colleagues. The recognition of women physicians and surgeons came only after a long struggle which was carried on for many years by men and women all over the world. This struggle probably really began way back in 1813 in England when a certain James Barry became an assistant in the British Army. This character was slightly built, with sandy hair and quite a sensitive disposition. He had studied at two universities and his professors had predicted a fine career for him because he had been such a brilliant student. In spite of his intelligence, his fellow students had never been fond of him. He seemed rather snobbish to them. He always sat very straight with his arms folded across his chest. He was made a laughing stock because he refused to go alone at night on emergency calls that took him into the slums. He had never entered in the sports either, and would not stand up and fight, no matter how much fun was poked at him. His fellow students were somewhat relieved when he left them to join the British Army. In 1815 he was made assistant surgeon. He served in Quebec, Malta, South Africa, and the West Indies. He gained the same reputation in the army that he had in college. He was hot-tempered and broke rules whenever he felt like it. He was a strict vegetarian and never took an alcoholic drink. He liked to boast of his way with women, and had learned to box and defend himself in his numerous fist fights.

In spite of his disagreeable personality, his colleagues could not help respecting his ability as a doctor. He saved patients that other doctors had pronounced hopeless. In the West Indies, he worked tirelessly to wipe out an epidemic of smallpox, and received a promotion for his success. He fought for the honor of his profession and stormed at the abuses and graft involved. He advocated a law to make it necessary for apothecaries to pass examinations before being allowed to fill prescriptions.

By his skill and prominence in his profession, a great deal of attention was focused on him. People became curious about him. Who was he and where did he come from? But Doctor Barry never gave any satisfaction to the askers of these questions. He kept on with his life as always, temperamental and moody, breaking disciplinary rules enough to be arrested several times.

His promotions had come regularly until in 1858 he was made an Inspector-General of the Army Hospitals. The next year he was living in England, an old person wearing a strange wig and only an ill-mannered little dog as a companion. In 1865, he was found dead, and, in a day or two, the mystery that had shrouded his life was in the open. According to the surgeons who performed the post-mortem examination, the doctor had been a *woman*. Further examination revealed that at some time she had given birth to a child.

At the time of her death, no one came to claim her body, and whoever knew the secret of her birth and reasons for her unusual life, kept her silence. Her headstone bears the name which she had born proudly and had been known by for so long, Dr. James Barry.

So the first woman doctor to serve in the army had lived among men as a man, and in competition with her medical colleagues, and had come through with flying colors. The praise that she had received had given courage to women, and an answer to those who argued that women were unfit for the profession. In 1876, Parliament passed a law giving British universities the right to grant medical degrees to women. This was one of the first victories in the long fight for recognitions.

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PETER BACKS A PUNCH

by C. A. BALDWIN

BEDLAM was still reigning in the arena. The champion had been beaten—knocked out. A new heavy-weight king had been crowned and the tremendous crowd was still giving vent to the thrill produced by one of the greatest upsets in modern boxing history.

In the dressing room of the dethroned champ the only sound that punctuated the oppressive silence was the slap of the trainer's hands as he kneeded and soothed the aching muscles of the ex-champ. And, from far down the corridor came the faint but unmistakable sounds of an impromptu celebration in the dressing quarters of the winner and new champion.

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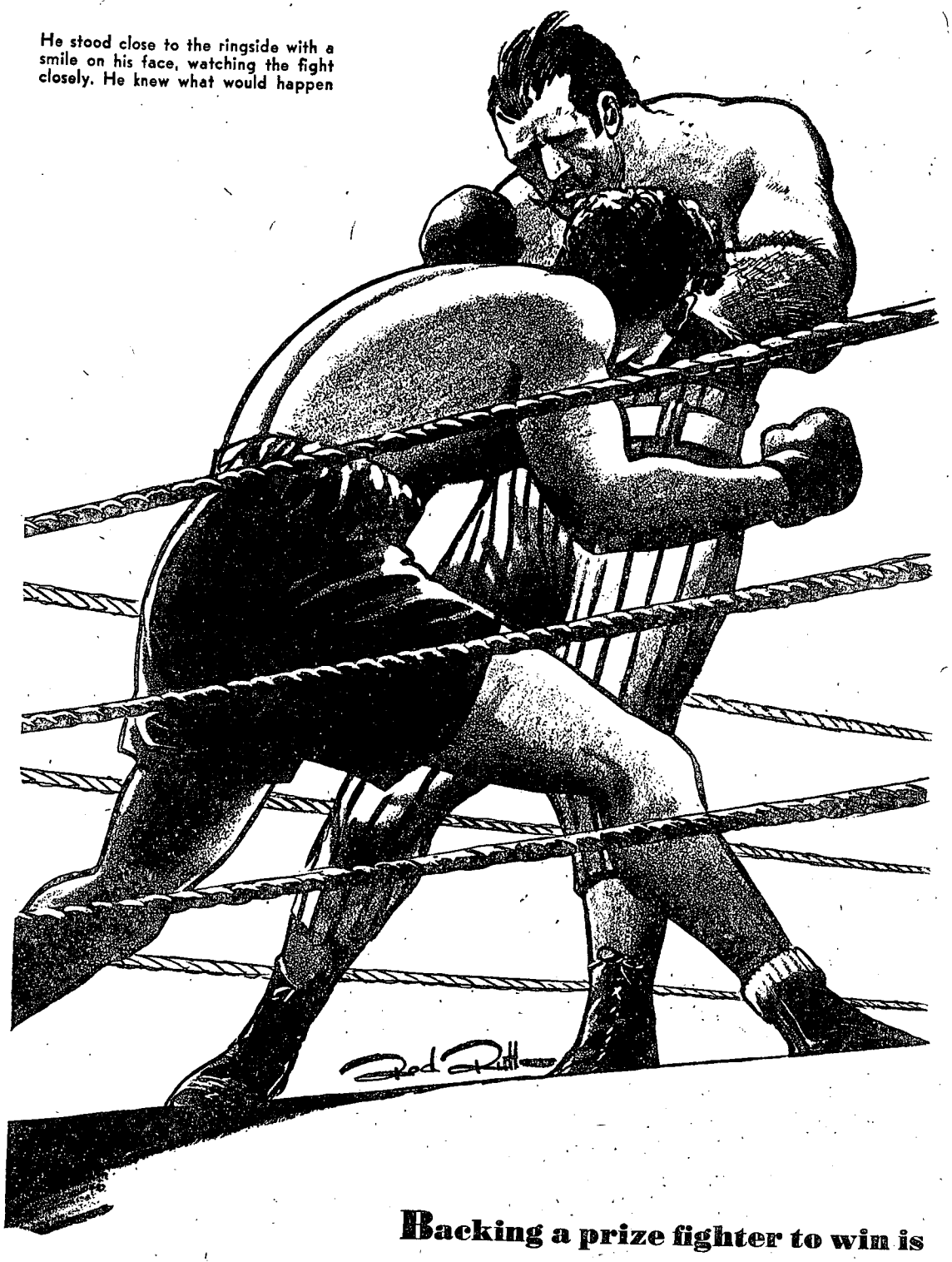
He stood close to the ringside with a smile on his face, watching the fight closely. He knew what would happen



Backing a prize fighter to win is no easy feat. But the kindly old man had a system — not to mention a certain halo.

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A couple of ugly welts under his eyes which were already turning blue and a gash at the corner of his mouth were the only marks visible on Curly Thompson, the fallen champ, as he lay on the rubbing table and gratefully absorbed the expert manipulations of the trainer.

The trainer ended his massage with a final slap, threw his towels over his arm, picked up his linaments and lotions and said, "Okay, Curly, that does it. Better let the doc take a look at those eyes—they might give you a little trouble."

At the door of the room, the trainer turned around and, with an awkwardness that showed his sincerity, said, "That wasn't you in there tonight, Curly. That big gorilla was just lucky to catch you on the worst night that I've ever seen you have." He paused for a moment and then continued, "Aw, hell, Curly, you'll kick his teeth in when you get back in the ring with him."

Curly managed a tired smile and answered, "Thanks, pal, it's nice to hear those words and I wish I could believe them."

"Well, goodnight, Curly, I'll be seeing you around."

As soon as the trainer had left the room, Curly raised himself to a sitting position and stared at the back of the only other man in the room. Pop Higgins, Curly's manager, stood staring out the window into the night, slowly clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back. He seemed to sense Curly's eyes staring at him and with a deliberateness that accentuated the anger that was burning him up, he turned to face Curly.

"Well, Pop," Curly said, "I guess we're not champs anymore."

"For twenty-five years I've been fighting and handling fighters, but I've never seen a fight as absolutely stinking as the one you put up tonight."

Curly started to say something, but now Pop was really getting warmed up to his subject and cut right through Curly's first words. "Why, damn it, that guy didn't even belong in the same ring with you and to that mob he made you look like seven different kinds of a chump."

"I can't figure it out, Curly, and all I can say is that you didn't even go through the motions tonight. You got on a bicycle and you didn't get off it until that palooka got you in a corner and knocked you off it—and out of the championship.

"A lot of guys are going to have some nasty things to say about what happened in there tonight and if I were you I wouldn't be too anxious to read the newspapers tomorrow—"

Pop would have kept right on going, his words becoming sharper and more biting every moment, but finally Curly broke through the torrent.

"Look, Pop, I hope you're not trying to hint that I threw that fight, because of you are—" Curly left his words unfinished as he slid off the rubbing table and came to his feet.

Pop waved his hand in disgust. "No, I don't think you threw it, Curly. You just quit—quit cold and a guy that you should have beat with one hand knocked you for a loop."

"Well," Pop continued, "I had thirty grand bet on you tonight and that just about cleans me so I guess I'd better start looking around for another meal ticket."

"Cut it out, Pop. I know I was awful out there. But, something was wrong—I know what it was—"

Pop didn't give him a chance to finish. "Sure there was something wrong. But it just happened to be a nice, wide yellow streak running right down your backbone. I just don't like

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that color so you can go find yourself another manager who may have some use for it. If you don't get what I mean, I'll make it clear—I quit."

The little manager stalked across the room before Curly had time to catch his breath, walked out and slammed the door. In a moment the door banged open and Pop stuck his head in just long enough to say, "And, I don't want a quitter for a son-in-law so you can just go fly your kite some other place."

The door closed with a bang that gave the proper punctuation to Pop's final remark.

AFTER Pop's emphatic departure, Curly dived into his shower, climbed into his clothes and hurried out of the depressing atmosphere of the silent dressing room which was only adding to the gloom of his emotions. Unconsciously, he was hurrying to the small restaurant where for several years, after each fight, he had been meeting Sheila. In the tiny lunch room they would sit contentedly over their steaks and coffee, discuss and re-live the fight and then gradually drift into their plans for the future.

Their plans called for Curly's retirement from the ring in the Fall, marriage, and then the establishment of a large sporting goods store in the downtown section of New York. While Curly was completing his dressing the thought ran through his mind that the unforeseen licking had only hastened by a few months the announcement of his retirement.

Curly was a bright lad and he had no intention of winding up as a punch-drunk palooka like so many of the boys who had stayed in the game for just one fight too many. Curly knew why he had lost that fight; he had seen it happen to several fighters before. A blow to the left side of his head early in the fight had injured one of the optic nerves and created a blind spot so that it was impossible for him to see a left hook thrown at him by his opponent. Consequently, in order to protect himself from serious injury he had gone strictly on the defensive and would sail in with occasional brief flurries whenever he thought that he saw an opening where there would be a chance of him landing a kayo. But, his defensive skill, as excellent as it was had failed to save him from the slashing, shattering hooks of the other slugger and he finally fell to his face on the canvass, absorbing a series of punches that would have put any other man out long before. In his heart Curly knew that he had fought a good fight and he felt sick knowing how Pop felt about it and the roasting he knew that he would take in tomorrow's paper.

So while he was keenly disappointed over the loss of the fight and the championship, he was looking toward his meeting with Sheila where he knew he would find a sympathetic listener. Together they would talk about the speeding-up of plans that they had built and cherished for the past two years.

Sheila was not sitting at their usual place in the restaurant. She was waiting for him right at the front door and it didn't take her very long to say what was on her mind. Her eyes in which Curly had expected to see a warm glow of sympathy and understanding were blazing with anger.

"I was outside of your dressing room door when Pop told you off. Everything that he said goes for me, too. There's never been a quitter connected with the Higgins clan, Curly, and we're not going to start making those kind of additions now."

"Look, Sheila, you've got to give

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me a chance to explain this. You know I've never quit on anything in my life and I certainly didn't take a powder tonight."

Curly had started his little speech with the intention of telling Sheila just what had happened, but having the blood of the Irish running through his veins, too, he started to burn up at the kicking around he was getting from the two people whom he thought more of than anyone else in the world. So his own voice grew sharper and biting as he continued, "Aw, hell, what's the use of trying to explain anything. I guess it's just the old story of when a guy is champ and king-pin all the world is his oyster. When he hasn't got what it takes anymore, he's just another guy named Joe—just another poor palooka.

Perhaps Sheila recognized some justice through the bitterness of Curly's words because her eyes and voice softened as she looked at him and said, "We're not deserting a sinking ship, Curly. We just want to be sure that the ship flying our colors has got the kind of stuff that can take a good beating in a storm before it goes down."

"Look, Curly," Sheila's voice had almost become pleading now, "I still love a fellow named Curly Thompson, and I'll love him whether he's champ or just a guy who runs a grocery store. All I'm asking you to do is get the return fight which they have to give you and give that guy the kind of a scrap that I know you can give him. I don't care whether you win, lose or draw, Curly, just give him a real fight. Then you can come and fly your kite over our house again."

Without another word Sheila turned and almost ran out of the restaurant, leaving Curly standing there numb with surprise. Two knockouts in one night is more than any man can take.

CHAPTER II

CURLY wasn't a student of nature, but the next morning after reading the terrific panning that the sports writers had given him in the papers, he sought the solitude that a nearby park offered in the morning hours. Not wishing to be recognized by well-wishers or professional sympathizers, he jammed his hat down over his eyes and slouched down the gravel walks of the park.

Finally tiring of his aimless stroll, he sat down on an unoccupied bench and lost himself in the dark thoughts that can go through a man's mind when he figures that he has lost just about everything dear to him. Curly didn't know how long he sat there oblivious to the things occurring about him and consequently, he almost jumped in surprise when a voice right next to him said, "A lovely morning, is it not?"

Curly hadn't any idea how long the small, elderly and dignified man who addressed him had been sitting there, but, he did resent the intrusion on the privacy of his thoughts and only grunted an unintelligible reply to the little man's friendly overture.

But, the kindly old man didn't seem to be the least bit discouraged by Curly's truculence and continued to make pleasant, unconsequential remarks until Curly who was naturally a most friendly person started to thaw out. At last the stage was reached which seemed to call for the exchange of names so the ex-champ said, "My name is Thompson—Curly Thompson. What's yours?"

The old gentleman hesitated briefly before replying and then answered, "My name is Peter."

"Peter," echoed Curly, "Is that the first name or the last?"

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Again the little man hesitated before answering, then: "Just plain Peter will do. I guess that's what most folks call me."

Curly just shrugged off the vagueness of the answer and made a mental note that he was probably talking to some rich, old eccentric who didn't want to make himself known to everyone with whom he chanced to strike up an idle park bench conversation.

There was something in the little man's make-up that Curly instinctively liked and therefore, he pursued the questioning a little farther. "What line of business are you in?" he aked.

Peter seemed to think a moment before answering that innocent question and when he did reply, Curly found the answer somewhat amusing. "Oh," Peter said, "I guess I'm what you call an astronomer."

Curly chuckled as he replied, "Well, you're not the only one who sees the stars. I saw quite a few odd ones myself last night."

The old man seemed puzzled over that reply and his forehead knitted in thought. "I'm not quite sure I know what you mean," he said. "Would you mind explaining, please?"

"Doesn't the name Curly Thompson mean anything to you?"

Peter gave his head a negative shake and said, "I'm sorry. Is the name Curly Thompson supposed to mean anything to me?"

"I take it that you don't follow the fight game very closely," Curly answered, "Because if you did, you would have seen my name splashed over the sport sheets of every paper in town."

"I'm afraid I don't," Peter answered. "You see, my duties are so heavy that about the only things I get to read are papers and reports in my own field." But, I do wish you'd tell me something about yourself and this fight game you mention."

Curly felt that he had found a sympathetic listener so he poured out his tale of woe and felt a warm glow of friendship for the little man as he sat listening with an occasional understanding nod.

After Curly had finished his story, Peter said, "So, if you believe you're what you call washed up as a fighter, isn't there something else you can do in this—this fight racket?" Although he was choosing his words with hesitancy, Peter was picking up fight jargon with surprising rapidity.

"OH, I suppose that I could take a crack at the promoting angle, but, all the fighters that have any kind of box office appeal are tied up with Jake Michaels, or, one of the big-shots from the East. I'd have to pick up some of the ham and eggers and they're not even good for cigarette money."

"Nope," Curly continued, "I guess there's not much use in considering that angle because I'd have to tie-in with another Dumpsey or Lewis to make any dough."

"A Dumpsey or Lewis," echoed Peter, "I presume from the way you say their names that they must be pretty good fighters."

"Good fighters!" exclaimed Curly, "You mean to say—" and then Curly remembered that his new found friend had explained to him that he didn't know a single thing about the fight business. "Well, anyway," Curly continued more mildly, "Dumpsey was heavyweight champ about twenty-five years ago and Lewis retired as champ about eight years ago. Gosh," mused Curly, "What a whale of a battle those two would have put up if they'd been fighting at the same time. Yeah, a scrap like that would pull a two million dollar gate and settle the question

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once and for all of which one could punch the hardest and take the most."

Curly grew silent as the fighter instinct in him helped him visualize the battle that Dumpsey and Lewis in their prime would have put on. He could picture the sock-fest and in his mind even heard the hysteria of the crowd as those two would stand toe to toe and slug it out.

His thoughts were interrupted by Peter who in a very mild tone of voice asked, "Well, son, if you think the people would pay two million dollars to see that fight, why don't you and I bring those two together in the ring?"

Curly was mildly amused at Peter's well-meant but misguided effort to be helpful. "Sure, Peter, that would be swell. But, you don't seem to get the idea. Dumpsey is close to fifty now and Lewis is well past his fighting prime and hog-fat besides. Why, if you put those two in the ring now, they'd both fall on their faces before the first round was half-way over."

"You're wrong, Curly. I do get the idea. I'm proposing something just a bit out of the ordinary. Here's what I mean. Let's turn the clock back a bit—say twenty-five years for Mr. Dumpsey and six years for Mr. Lewis. That, I take it from your remarks would bring the two of them into the ring just at the peak of their physical condition."

Curly, who had been sitting slouched down on the bench with his legs pushed straight out in front of him snapped to erectness with astonishing speed. "Say, have you gone off your nut?" Then noticing the gleam of amusement in Peter's eyes, he continued, "Boy, did I bite on that one. Next time you're going to spring one like that, give me a little warning. For a second, I thought I was listening to a crack-pot. But, I admit that would be a swell stunt, to say nothing about the load of dough we could coin in promoting a scrap like that."

"You still don't get the idea, Curly. I am serious about it. I guarantee you that it's not impossible." The look of amusement had gone from Peter's eyes to be replaced by a mixture of seriousness and intentness.

"Now wait a minute, Peter. I hope you're not going to try and sell me on the idea of investing some money in a time machine. Or, maybe you are just a bit—" And, from the way Curly started casting his eyes around in search of a policeman, there seemed to be no doubt in his mind as just what he thought about the mental soundness of Peter.

"Don't look so startled, Curly. I assure you that I'm not an escaped inmate of an asylum, and I'm not trying to sell you an interest in a time machine. Now, if you'll just listen to me and try and have some faith in what I'm telling you, you'll find that I can do just what I claim I can do. Anyway, be logical," Peter continued, "You have everything to gain and nothing to lose."

Once again Curly found himself gazing straight into Peter's eyes and the fire of sincerity that he saw in the eyes that seemed to have a bottomless depth forced him to a belief that seemed crazy, impossible. Slowly, Curly spoke, choosing every word with an exacting deliberateness, "You are asking me to believe something which I know is impossible. Yet, strangely enough, I find myself believing it. I feel that you are not hypnotizing me, but, when I look into your eyes, I believe what you say.

"Tell me, Peter, who are you? What is this strange power that you have that can turn back the hands of time?"

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Curly, in his bewilderment was pleading with Peter to relieve the strain that this strange talk was placing on his only human emotion.

"You ask a question to which I cannot give you a direct answer. Still, if you believe in what I tell you and if you have the confidence in me which you have seemed to acquire, I'm sure a guess on your part would not be far wrong."

FOR several moments Curly stared at Peter and slowly a look of comprehension was dawning in his eyes. "You must—yes, you must be St.—"

"That's another rule," Peter interrupted, "You can make as many guesses as you want but they can't be spoken aloud. Between ourselves and as far as anyone else is concerned, I'm merely an astronomer taking in the sights of the city while on a vacation. Do you understand, Curly?"

In Curly's eyes the look of bewilderment had been replaced by one of awe and he could only gulp and nod his head in response to Peter's question.

Peter continued, "Curly, I've decided to help you because you seem to be a fine young man who has acquired an undeserved load of bad luck. So, we'll settle your financial problem first, and then I'm sure we can show Sheila that you're still a champion, at least at heart.

"So, young man, you listen to what I have to say. I'll tell you how far I can go in helping you and from that point on, you'll have to take over."

Peter began to talk, first slowly and then more rapidly as Curly's confusion and numbness seemed to be vanishing. After a while Curly started to smile and it rapidly developed into a delighted grin. Obviously, Peter had removed the last doubts from Curly's mind.

Peter concluded by saying, "And, that's what I shall do to make this affair possible. The arrangements will depend entirely upon you.

"I'm afraid I shall have to leave you now as I have other business that I must take care of. I shall see you in your hotel room at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. Goodbye, Curly."

Curly had turned slightly aside to light a cigarette and when he turned around Peter had vanished, as suddenly and completely as if the earth had swallowed him.

Curly stared in dumb amazement at the spot on the bench that Peter had so recently occupied. Then he snatched a pin from his coat lapel, which like many other boxers he carried there as a luck token, and gave himself a hard jab in the leg with the pin.

Curly hadn't been dreaming. The pin jab hurt like hell!

Swiftly Curly bounced off the bench and with a gallop that was more effective than dignified, started off to make arrangements for the fight of the century.

CHAPTER III

THE next morning Curly was sitting in his hotel room, a picture of despair. The reason for his deep gloom was seen in the headlines of the sports page spread out in front of him.

"HAS EX-HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMP GONE WHACKY?

Did Curly Thompson take one punch too many last Friday when he dropped the championship to Dick Weller?

Or, has the usual sober Curly taken to the bottle in an effort to wipe out memories of that miserable fight in which he practically

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gave away the title?

Yesterday afternoon Curly Thompson visited the offices of this paper and announced that he was retiring from the ring and hereafter would promote the fights instead of indulging in them.

—Before we had the opportunity to wish him well on his new venture, he made another and more startling announcement. And, here, boxing fans, is where you get the opportunity to judge for your self: Is Curly Thompson punchy or has old King Bourbon got him down for a ten count?

Curly very proudly announced that his first fight would take place one month from today and that the battlers would be—now get this folk—none other than Jock Dumpsey and Joel Lewis.

That a[b]out knocked us off our chairs, b[u]t knowing that sometimes ret[i]ed fighters in need of a little rea[l]y cash come out for another fig[h]t, we were almost ready to believ[e] what Curly told us. But, here's w[h]at really floored us. Curly told us that he not only would bring Dumpsey and Lewis together in the ring, but that the hands of time would be turned back and that both of the men would enter the ring at the age of 26—the exact time in each of their lives when they were practically murdering any fighter who had the nerve to step in the ring with them.

Curly said, 'This fight will settle once and for all the question of which was the best mauler in modern ring history.'

Oh, yes, we almost forgot to tell you. After Curly left the office, we called both Dumpsey and Lewis on long distance phone. Needless to say, both of them were somewhat flabbergasted when they were informed that they were going to fight in New York next week.

Will we see you at the Madison Arena next week, Suckers?"

For the third time Curly picked up the paper and read the article from start to finish and for the third time slammed it to the floor in disgust. Just then the phone rang.

"Hello. What? Aw, go to hell!"

He had no sooner set the phone back on the hook than it rang again.

"Hello. Yes. Nuts to you!" And the receiver went back on the hook with a vengeful bang.

Maddeningly the phone buzzed again and Curly reached around, grabbed it and jiggled the hook frantically up and down. When the hotel operator finally answered his flashing, Curly practically bellowed, "If you put through another call to this room, I'll come down there and rip that switchboard apart."

Curly started to swivel around and halted with a jarring abruptness. Peter was sitting in a chair, a broad smile on his face as if he found Curly's tantrum most amusing.

"Peter! How did you get in here?"

"Need you ask that question, my boy? I rather thought you would be used to my abrupt arrivals and departures by this time."

Curly wiped his perspiring brow with a handkerchief and said, "You're right, Peter, but that article in the paper and now those telephone calls with everyone and their brothers putting the needles in me have really got me down."

Peter merely glanced at the headlines and still smiling said, "Well, what did you expect, Curly?"

Curly, a startled expression on his face said, "Do you mean you expected something like this?"

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"Why, of course, Curly. If you were the editor of that paper wouldn't you have said just about the same thing if someone had come into your office and told you that he was going to stage a fight between two old-timers and that they would fight at the age when they were in the peak of their condition. After all, Curly, the average human mind will only believe as far as it can see. Why do you expect the editor of this paper to be any different?"

Peter was right and Curly knew it. "Yeah, I guess I can't argue the point, but that doesn't make the situation any better. What are you going to do to stop that kind of stuff? If we can't stop it, you can just bet that we'll have the grand total of a hundred people at that fight."

Peters reply was brief and to the point. "I have no intention of doing anything about it."

CURLY was getting a bit hot under the collar by this time. He had plunked down a substantial part of the guarantee to the Arena management, ordered the tickets and other printed material and now he could visualize all that money going down the drain.

"Well, Peter, we might just as well call the show off then. I've got some money but not enough to throw it away for the privilege of putting on a fight for the amusement of a couple of hundred curiosity seekers. Why, do you realize—"

Peter halted Curly's tirade by a little wave of his hand. "Curly, you said that you had confidence in me. At the moment you are not living up to your statement. Now, if you'll just sit down and cool off for a few moments, I'll set your mind at ease."

Feeling ashamed of his outburst, Curly dragged a chair close to Peter, sat down and waited out the next few moments of Peter's silence. But, as he sat there he was again conscious of that feeling of reassurance and confidence that always seemed to come when Peter was around.

Finally, the kindly little man started to speak. "When we planned this fight yesterday, I knew exactly what would happen. Perhaps I should have warned you so that you would not have been so completely upset. However, I assure you that there is no cause for alarm even though we don't get more than ten people to attend this fight. All you have to do is see to it that the newspaper reporters are there and you won't have to worry about a substantial return on your investment.

"You see, Curly, I'm a rather thorough sort of person. In my, ah—line of business one has to be that way. So, last night I delved into our file, which, by the way is most complete in the event that you want to find out some things about yourself which you may have forgotten, and I found that many years ago there was a heavyweight champion by the name of John L. Sullivan.

"Yes, I know he was good, you don't have to tell me that," Peter interjected as he saw that Curly was on the point of breaking into the conversation. "I also understand from our files that this Sullivan chap is considered by many to be the really greatest fighter of all times although others seem to believe that your friends Dumpsey or Lewis are the king heavyweights of all times. So, Curly, here is what I propose to do.

"We shall proceed on schedule with the Dumpsey-Lewis fight. Unquestionably, it will be the kind of thing that fight-goers love to see. So, again I say to you, just be sure that the fight reporters are at the ringside and when their stories are run in the papers, you

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won't be able to get an arena big enough to hold all the people that will want to attend the fight between John L. Sullivan and the winner of the Dumpsey-Lewis bout. Now, how does that sound to you?"

Curly didn't answer—he couldn't because his lower jaw was hanging at least five inches from its normal position and he was staring at Peter as if wondering if Peter had actually spoken the words he had just heard. This time Curly pinched himself to see if he was dreaming. He wasn't.

Finally Curly managed to blurt out, "But, Peter, Sullivan has been dead for almost thirty years. You certainly can't bring a man back from the gra—"

Again Peter silenced Curly by merely a wave of the hand. "Questions are out of bounds, Curly. And, don't forget that I'm only an astronomer, so I couldn't possibly answer the question you were on the point of asking." Peter smiled to soften the slight rebuke and almost grinned when he saw Curly gulp and choke back the hundreds of questions that had almost erupted.

"Okay, Peter, I won't get out of bounds again. But, that almost had me down for the count so you can imagine what'll happen when other people hear it."

Peter only nodded and smiled. "I shouldn't wonder. It is a bit unusual, isn't it?"

Peter was silent for a moment and then continued. "Now, I suggest that you get your arrangments under way, Curly, as I imagine that the next few weeks will be rather hectic ones.

"And, now I must be going as I have to give some attention to a few other pressing matters. I shall see you in the morning."

"Whoa, wait a minute, Peter," Curly almost shouted as he had visions of Peter vanishing as suddenly as he had the day before.

Peter turned with an inquiring look and Curly said, "I hate to bother you about this, Peter, because you're already doing so much for me. But, isn't there anything that can be done about Sheila?"

"I wouldn't worry about that, Curly. Our records on Sheila seem to indicate that the young lady is very much in love with Curly Thompson. And, as love always finds a way, I'm sure that everything will work out alright."

The phone suddenly rang and after Curly had answered it with a few short words, he turned to find that again Peter had made his speedy exit. Curly only stood there and shook his head. He didn't think that he'd ever get used to these sudden comings and goings—almost like a ghost.

CHAPTER IV

"GOOD EVENING, ladies and gentlemen. This is Sam Taul broadcasting for Station WTNT from the Madison Arena.

"I don't know what we're going to see here tonight, so don't let anything that happens surprise you. And, if nothing happens, don't let that surprise you either.

"We're supposed to see and broadcast tonight a so-called battle of the century—a bout between Jack Dumpsey, the old Manhattan mauler and Joel Lewis, undefeated, retired champion. You'll notice that I said we're supposed to see it. Now, just what we will see is something that I can't even guess about.

"For the past week, the papers have been filled with stories of the alleged fight that is to take place between these two greatest battlers with the fight being arranged and promoted by no less a

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person than Curly Thompson, the man who lost his heavyweight title a month ago tonight.

"No one knows what kind of a trick that Curly is trying to pull in advertising and ballyhooing the statement that Dumpsey and Lewis will appear tonight in this ring—and to make the whole thing sound even crazier, Thompson has repeatedly said that both fighters will have shed enough years to take them right back to their prime—back to the days when Dumpsey and Lewis were knocking over one fighter after another as if they were pins on a bowling alley.

"Curly, I might add, hasn't explained just how he's going to manage this extraordinary feat and it's my guess that he's been the victim of some bad dreams.

"I'll only add one more thing before I get on with what's going on ringside. Both Dumpsey and Lewis were contacted by your announcer before he left for the arena tonight. Both assure me that they have not had any direct or indirect contact with Curly Thompson and that it is their own belief that the whole thing is a huge hoax. Dumpsey had intended to be here tonight just to see what was going to happen, but, at the last minute had to change his plans because some important business matter came up that made it necessary for him to leave the city.

"From this point on, ladies and gentlemen, I'll stop attempting to diagnose what Curly has up his sleeve and will confine myself to facts. Your guess on what is going to happen is just as good as mine, so you're on your own in that department from now on.

"There're no more than five or six hundred people here who were curious enough to pay the admission price plus a swarm of reporters, photographers and broadcasters. So, you can imagine just how barren this vast arena seems at the moment. Of course, all the members of the boxing commission are right down at the ringside and from the expressions on their faces, Curly better come through with something pretty interesting, or those gentlemen are going to be right down his throat.

"The fight is scheduled to go on in ten minutes, but, so far we haven't seen the slightest sign of anyone who looks like they're going up into that ring and put on a fight. Art Bellow, the announcer, is standing in the center of the ring and Al Donnelly, who has been selected as the referee by the Commission is patiently sitting in a corner of the ring waiting for something to happen—and something better happen pretty soon. The crowd is getting very impatient and the members of the Boxing Commission are starting to twist their heads around as if they're looking for Curly—but so far Curly hasn't been seen around the Arena.

"OUTSIDE of the lighted ring and the waiting officials, there's absolutely nothing to indicate that a fight is scheduled to—"

"Wait—hold on just a minute folks. Something is happening. I can't see anything, yet—the people on the west side of the ring are all on their feet and have completely blocked my view. There's a terrific commotion going on over there and it really looks like something big is coming off—I'm just as excited about this as you are folks, and I'll try to have some information for you in a moment or two—just as soon as they get that crowd cleared away.

"The excitement is spreading all around the arena now although most of them don't know just what's going on. Hold it—here come some policemen

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now—I think they'll soon have that jam cleared away and then we'll see what's happening. They're pushing their way into the crowd now and trying to form a lane for someone to get through.

"There—that does the trick. Two—no three—and there's the fourth. Four men are coming past that milling mob—one of them in a blue bath robe and purple trunks. They're coming down close now and we'll see in just a second—"

"Ye gods—this can't be true. It IS Joel Lewis! Ladies and gentlemen, something is happening here which there is no accounting for. That's Lewis coming toward the ring—the Lewis that we knew of nine years ago—the somber, dead-pan Sepia Slugger. I wouldn't believe this if I wasn't seeing it myself—but, there he is going into the ring now—slipping through the ropes with the same pantherish grace of the Lewis we used to know.

"His trainers and seconds are climbing in after him. That's Sam Blackside with him—the one that has his arms around Lewis' shoulders—the same Sam Blackside that brought Lewis from the amateur ranks up through the heavyweight title. And, all of those are Lewis' old seconds—the same ones that were in his corner for everyone of his fights.

"Say, this is terrific. The crowd including the Boxing Commission are all milling around the ring acting as if they can't believe what they see—I don't blame them—I can't believe it either.

"Now there's another commotion from in front of the dressing-room doors. Here comes Dumpsey! Dumpsey in those old flaming, red trunks. This is a flash-back through time. The Dumpsey coming down this aisle is the lean, beetle-browed, savage looking Dumpsey that wrecked Tex Hillard at Toledo, Billy Siske at Boyle's Acres and Tommy Gibson at Butte. This is the old Manhattan Mauler with the dynamite in his left and the pile-driving right. It's almost impossible to believe, but this the Dumpsey of old—coming into the ring with a thick, three-day growth of whiskers in line with the old Dumpsey superstition.

"Dumpsey just vaulted over ropes and now there's Jock Kurns his old manager climbing in after him. Yep, there's Julie Klein his trainer and Lefty Williams his chief second.

"I can't begin to tell you the confusion and amazement going on at ringside. Both fight parties are now in their corners and they seem to be the calmest individuals around here. Art Bellow, the announcer, is hanging on the ropes as if he needed their support and Al Donnelly is still sitting in a corner of the ring just staring. Al refereed bouts for both of these boys in years gone by and he should certainly recognize them if anyone can. Apparently he does because his eyes just keep traveling from Dumpsey to Lewis and back again and he's continually shaking his head.

"At last, here comes Curly Thompson wearing a grin a mile wide. There's someone else with Curly—a small, dignified, almost saintly looking fellow. Never saw him around before. Must be one of Curly's backers.

"The boys from the press box are starting to mob Curly now—trying to get an explanation from him. He's just waving them all away and is pushing his way through to the ring. There's cameras clicking and flash bulbs exploding all around the rings as the photographers are taking shots at all kinds of angles of Lewis and Dumpsey.

"Both of the fighters are sitting in their corners getting last minute instructions and it looks like something

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is due to start pretty soon—providing Art Bellow can recover his voice long enough to make the announcement and if someone can bring the referee out of his trance.

Curly Thompson is going over to talk to Bellow now. He's got his hand on his shoulder and is shaking him gently now while he's leaning over and talking directly into his ear. Bellow seems to be coming out of his fog now. He's looking up at Curly and is nodding as Curly keeps talking to him. Here he comes to the center of the ring and is reaching for the microphone. The next voice you hear will be that of Art Bellow!"

"LADIES and gentlemen," Bellows paused for a moment as if he was still trying to bring his emotions under control and then continued, "Tonight's fight brings together two of the greatest champions of all time in a fifteen round battle.

"On my right, wearing purple trunks is the undefeated, retired heavyweight champion, Joel Lewis, weighing 201 pounds. On my—" Bellow broke off his announcement as Lewis stood up, tipped his gloves at the crowd and received an ovation that would have done credit to a fight crowd of ten times the number that were actually present.

"On my left, wearing scarlet trunks, weighing 197 pounds is one of the most popular champions of all times, Jack Dumpsey." The crowd let lose with a roar that equalled the reception given to Lewis.

Bellow held up his hand for silence and then continued, "You all know that this fight is being held under the strangest circumstances on record and while we are looking at Dumpsey as he appeared at the time he won his championship and at Lewis as he appeared at the time he took the crown from Bradford, the Boxing Commission can offer no explanation for this. Therefore, the commission asks you to accept this fight at its face value until such a time as additional facts can be obtained.

"Curly Thompson, the promoter of this fight asks that you all remain in your seats after the conclusion of this fight as he has an important announcement to make to you. Thank you."

"This is Sam Taul back on the air. You have just heard Art Bellow making the announcement preparatory to the strangest fight in history. There's nothing that I can add to what has already been said except that the tension around the ring is now terrific and my voice is about the only one that can be heard.

"Dumpsey is standing up in his corner moving around a bit to keep limber while Lewis is doing some slight bending exercises in his corner of the ring.

"Donnelly has now gone to the center of the ring and is motioning to both fighters to come out. The robes have come off both the boys now and as they walk toward Donnelly you can see that they represent the acme of physical condition.

"Donnelly has placed a hand on each of their shoulders now and he stares for a long second into each of their faces—still trying to assure himself that these boys are actually Lewis and Dumpsey. He's talking to them now—very quietly; Lewis seems to be examining his shoe tops and Dumpsey is staring into the crowd. Now, both of the fighters nod their heads in agreement as Donnelly finishes his instructions. They touch their gloves together in the age old custom of the ring and are walking back to their corners to come out fighting at the sound of the bell.

"THERE it is—the bell for the first round and the most amazing fight in history is now underway.

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"Dumpsey is coming toward center in his old familiar low, weaving crouch, shuffling forward almost flat-footed. Lewis comes out standing erect, moving in lightly with left hand well extended and his right cocked. Each of them pack a knockout wallop in either hand so we're going to see some fireworks very soon.

"Lewis starts to circle to his left and Jack keeps shuffling forward in the old Dumpsey style. Lewis lashes out with a straight left that catches Jack high on the forehead. Another left catches Dumpsey on the shoulder—now a right that crashes home over Dumpsey's heart and another left that bounces off his chin. All of the punches were fairly hard, but they don't seem to have hurt Jack and he's still shuffling forward, still following Lewis trying to set him up for one of his tearing left hooks or murderous right uppercuts. Now Lewis snaps home three hard left jabs that jolts Dumpsey's head back. Still Dumpsey hasn't let loose with a single blow and the crowd is yelling for him to open up.

"Lewis is really warming up to his job now and is boxing beautifully. Again Lewis catches Dumpsey with a hard left, another left, another one—and Lewis is starting to swarm in on Dumpsey. Ooh! Dumpsey smashes in pile driving right to the jaw as Lewis left himself open—now another Dumpsey right—a left—a right and Lewis is reeling back under a series of hard lefts and rights to the head and body. Lewis is hurt by a terrific smash over the heart and he goes back to the ropes.

"Dumpsey is coming in for the kill—both hands ready to fire. Wham! Lewis isn't through by a long shot. He bounces off the ropes catches Dumpsey coming in with a long left and stops his charge completely with a power-house smash to the heart.

"Now Dumpsey is holding on and the crowd is going crazy while Lewis hammers home left and rights to the midsection. I don't know how long any man can stand that kind of punishment. Dumpsey rallies quickly and makes Lewis back up when a hard right catches him on the ear.

"They're both standing off now, looking each other over and taking a rest from the terrific pace of this first round. Both of them have been hit hard and they've gained plenty of respect for each other.

"Lewis is the first to break the momentary lull by throwing a light left which Jack partially blocks. Here we go again—Dumpsey leaps in throwing lefts and rights and Lewis is matching him blow for blow. They're fighting head to head now and the crowd is up on its feet now screaming like they've gone mad.

"Neither fighter will give an inch and the blows are raining in so furiously that it's impossible to count them. Oh-oh—a terrific left knocks Dumpsey back—Lewis follows with a swinging, jolting right, another left—Dumpsey's knees are starting to buckle—this may be the finish—Dumpsey looks bad. The bell! There goes the bell ending the first round and it looks very much that it saved Jack from at least a knockdown.

"That was the hottest, fastest first round that I've ever seen in this, or any other arena. Both fighters hit hard and often and times the blows were going in so fast that it was impossible to describe them to you.

"In my book the first round goes to Lewis by a wide margin although Dumpsey got in a lot of, hard damaging smashes. However, Lewis did plenty of damage himself and while his blows didn't seem to carry quite the power of Dumpsey's he still had Jack in very bad condition at the end of the round.

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But, this fight is a long way from over so don't sell either one of the fighters short.

"If anyone doubted that these two men appearing in the ring tonight are actually Lewis and Dumpsey, the first round should have set their mind at rest for there are no two other fighters alive today that could have put on that kind of a show.

"Lewis is resting easily in his corner and Dumpsey seems to have recovered completely from the last few jolts of the first round. Dumpsey had a small cut over one eye while Lewis' mid-section is heavily splotched from the power of Dumpsey's body blows. Both of them are still full of fight—there's the bell for the second round.

"LEWIS is coming out fast, confidently. Dumpsey moves more slowly, but always forward—following—following—always looking for that vulnerable spot where he can crash through with a haymaker. Lewis leads with his left and is short. Dumpsey counters with a hard right to the mouth and Lewis retaliates with a long left to the body. Lewis moves in with a left and right to the head and again Dumpsey counters with a right and left to the body. Lewis is short again with a left but catches Dumpsey with a right to the jaw as Jack tries to move in close.

"The fight is taking a pattern now—Dumpsey trying to get inside to make use of his infighting ability at which he's the best in the business and Lewis trying to hold him off with long, raking lefts and rights. Which style is the best and most effective? We'll soon see.

"Dumpsey charges in with a swinging left and Lewis is under it swinging both hands to Jack's middle. Jack straightens Lewis up with a hard left uppercut and both fighters fall into a clinch after coming to close quarters. They part before Donnelly has to break them and then stand at long range exchanging light lefts and rights. The pace in this round isn't as fast as the first.

"Dumpsey is bobbing now, weaving from side to side as he comes in—a difficult target to hit. Lewis tries to straighten him up with a left uppercut and takes an awful smash to the body. Lewis didn't like that—it hurt. Now Dumpsey has taken the offensive and he's moving in both arms swinging. A left to Lewis' stomach—a right in the same place. Dumpsey shakes off a hard right to the head and moves in with another left and right to Lewis' middle. Lewis is bending slightly now—those body punches must hurt.

"The crowd comes to its feet with a roar and Dumpsey straightens up and charges in with a terrific left to the head. Now, a right to the jaw—a straight left to the nose—a right hook to the ear—a left to the mouth and Lewis is staggering back to his own corner. Dumpsey follows him battering away at body and head. Lewis makes a stand—rallies with lefts to the head and rights to the body. Dumpsey shrugs off and comes tearing in. Lewis stops him with a right to the mouth and a left to the eye.

"Lewis is down! A straight right to the chin did it—Donnelly is counting—two—three—four—five—Lewis is on one knee—seven—eight and Lewis is up. The count helped Lewis—he seems okay. He flicks a left to Dumpsey's nose and another left to the eye and there goes the bell ending the second round.

"Dumpsey's round by a mile. The Manhattan Mauler really exhibited his wares that time and scored the first knockdown. Lewis was hurt in that round although he was in fair shape as he went to his corner. I think these terrible body blows that Jack landed in the

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first round took a lot of sap out of Lewis. Jack has a bad cut under his eye—wonder when he got that. Oh, oh, the Commission doctor is going over to look at Jack's eye. He says something to Jack and Jack scowls and almost pushes the doctor out of the ring. The doctor just shrugs his shoulders and climbs out. Must have suggested to Jack that he quit because of that eye. It really is bad, but Jock Kurns is working on it.

"Here's the bell for the third round and it's still anyone's fight. Lewis took a pretty bad beating in the last round but Jack got a bad eye. Lewis looks fresh and still confident. Dumpsey comes out of his corner crouched low—moving in slowly—deliberately. He's crowding now—not giving him a chance for any long range boxing. Wow! Lewis just lashed out with a right that caught Dumpsey flush on the jaw. Now another right to the same spot shakes Dumpsey. A left catches Dumpsey on the bad eye and its bleeding now.

"Lewis crosses Dumpsey up by leaping into close quarters and smashing hard rights and lefts to the body and then moves away before Dumpsey can fire. Now Lewis is moving in and nails Dumpsey with two short rights to the head and a left to the bad eye. Lewis certainly is making a come-back after the last round. Dumpsey doesn't look too good. He's staggering and his eye is bleeding pretty badly.

"Lewis is coming in fast. He runs into a short right to the head that stops him cold—Dumpsey swings a left to the head—a right to the mouth—a right to the jaw and a hard left and right to the body. Now Lewis is backing—fast. There's dynamite in Dumpsey's punches. Dumpsey catches Lewis in the corner—nails him with a long, terrific left that snaps Lewis' head back like it's on springs.

"Lewis tries a left and catches a right to the chin. Another hard right to the chin—Lewis tries to hang on—Jack pushes him off and measures him for the kayo. Lewis paws out with his left and rips the patch off Dumpsey's eye. Lewis goes down from a left uppercut. He doesn't take a count. He's up before Donnelly can start counting. Wham! There it goes. Lewis is down again and again comes up without a count. He's foggy and won't take a rest.

"There it goes! A hard, hard right to the chin and Lewis is sagging, falling like a toppled tree. He's down! Right on his face—not moving a muscle. Donnelly is counting but there isn't much use to count—five—six—seven—eight—nine—ten and out!

"Dumpsey wins by a knockout ending the most torrid fight I've ever seen in the third round.

"Lewis lifts himself upon one arm and then falls back on his face—that last punch that Dumpsey threw would have kayoed an ox. Lewis' seconds are rushing out of his corner now to help him. Dumpsey is already over there and has rolled Lewis over on his back so that he can get an arm under his shoulders. There—they've got Lewis on his feet now and he's half stumbling—half being carried to his corner. He'll be okay in a few moments. The commission doctor looks into his eyes puts a stethoscope over his heart, pats Lewis on the shoulder and then walks away. Lewis was just very badly stunned by the impact of that last punch.

"LADIES and Gentlemen, this sensational fight ended after two minutes of the third round had elapsed. It was a scorcher from start to finish and lived up to the estimates of the hundreds of thousands of fight fans who had often pictured a bout between these

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two wonderful battlers. Lewis fought the kind of battle of which he need never be ashamed, but, the battering punches of the Manhattan Mauler were just too much for any human body to stand against.

"Al Donnelly has just raised Dumpsey's right hand as the official winner of the fight and the all too small crowd of fight fans are giving him a terrific ovation. Dumpsey is walking toward his corner now and his handlers have thrown a robe around his shoulders and a towel over his head.

"Wait a minute folks, I'm going to try to get Jack Dumpsey to say a few words to you. Jack—Jack Dumpsey—hey, Jack. Over this way Jack. Kurns has turned Dumpsey around and is pointing over this way. Here he comes now.

"Hello Jack. Congratulations. Champ, that was a whale of a battle that you put up there. Jack, will you say a few words over the air?"

"Thanks, Sam. Sure, I'll be glad to say hello to everyone.

"Hello, everyone. I'm glad that fight is over because it's the toughest one I've ever been in. That chap, Lewis, is sure a scrapper."

"Jack, that's a pretty bad eye you've got there. Lewis has got a stiff wallop, hasn't he?"

"A stiff wallop? A couple of times he pretty near tore my head off with that right of his. With a couple more years of experience, Lewis, in my opinion will be one of the greatest of them all."

"That's pretty high praise, Jack. Now tell us just one more thing. The circumstances surrounding this fight are all very peculiar to say the least. Do you want to tell us anything about it?"

"Sorry, Sam, I've got to go now—I can see Jock Kurns waving at me. So long, Sam. So long folks."

"That was Jack Dumpsey, ladies and gentlemen, and you'll notice that we weren't at all successful in obtaining any kind of an explanation from him regarding the most peculiar aspects of this fight. Perhaps—"

"Lewis is leaving the ring now. He seems to be okay and is walking by himself. A squad of police have surrounded Lewis and his trainers and they're opening up a lane through the crowd. Dumpsey is leaving from the other side of the ring and he's also heavily escorted by police. They're both going into their dressing rooms now and police have been stationed in front of their doors—no one is being admitted. This gets more mysterious all the time.

"Curly Thompson has just climbed over the ropes and Art Bellow is waving to the crowd and asking for silence. Apparently, Curly is going to make that important announcement that they were talking about before the fight started. Maybe, he'll throw some light on this whole affair. Curly is coming to the public address microphone now, and in just a second you'll hear his voice."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Curly was smiling as he held on to the microphone stand, "Tonight you saw a fight which you will probably never forget—a fight which was strictly as advertised although the papers and everyone else called it an impossibility and some even referred to it as a fraud. However," and Curly got a bit facetious, "if anyone in the house feels that they didn't get their money's worth, or, that there was any evidence of fraud, all you have to do is step to the box office and you'll get your money back."

Curly grinned as the crowd let loose with a small din and cries of "Whatta scrap," and "You're okay, Curly," came floating to his ears. Then another big, bass voice let loose with, "Give us more,

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Curly." Then the crowd took that up as a chant.

Curly appreciated drama and mob psychology and stood there while the chant continued and gradually grew in crescendo until the vibrations ewere bouncing back and forth off the walls of the arena. Then, being the good judge of mob behavior, he waved his hands for silence. The electrician, appreciating the drama of the moment, switched off all the general lighting and directed a powerful spotlight on Curly. The whole arena was bathed in darkness and Thompson, with his tall, well-proportioned body and his shock of blond, curly hair made a spectacular figure in the glow of the spotlight.

"OKAY, you want more," Curly continued. "Well, I'm going to give you more."

Curly paused for another few moments to build up to the climax. "One month from tonight in this arena, another fight will take place—a fight that none of you or a million other fight fans will want to miss. The battle will be between Jack Dumpsey, winner of tonight's fight and—John L. Sullivan!"

Curly didn't amplify the statement. He didn't have to. At that moment the spotlight was turned off and the house lights switched on. The noise as the crowd released bated breath was like the hiss of escaping steam. Then the hubbub broke loose. A few just sat in dumb astonishment, but the balance of the crowd lifted to their feet, beat their hands on the seats in front of them, pounded each other on the back, tossed hats into the air, yelled and gave vent to every other possible form of enthusiasm. A fight between Jack Dumpsey and John L. Sullivan, the bar-room brawling, first world's heavyweight champion was a spectacle that everyone of them wouldn't miss if they had to hock their family jewels to buy their tickets.

At the peak of the noise and demonstration, Curly waved his hand to the crowd and vaulted over the ropes and out of the ring. The newspaper reporters and photographers tried to collar him for additional details of the sensational announcement, but he good-naturedly fended them off and pushed his way through to the Arena office. The reporters then made a bee-line for the exits nearly knocking each other down in their haste to get the story of tonight's fight to their papers in time to make the next edition.

CHAPTER V

THE stories in the paper the next morning were varied, but, they all added up to the same thing. The MIRROR devoted almost all of its first sports page to the story of the fight and the equally sensational announcement of the battle between Dumpsey and Sullivan.

The banner headline read:

"DUMPSEY KAYOES LEWIS IN 'GHOST' BATTLE! WINNER TO FIGHT JOHN L. SULLIVAN!

Last night in an unbelievable fight, Jack Dumpsey, heavyweight champion of another fighting era, knocked out Joel Lewis, recently retired champion.

The fight was a scorching, blood and thunder battle from the first bell and the few hundred fans who witnessed it were treated to a spectacle of ring savagery that can never be forgotten.

We can't even guess at what kind of magic was used to stage this fight, but ringsiders and officials who knew both Dumpsey and Lewis in their prime were ready to take oaths that the two fighters in the ring last night were actually the Dumpsey and Lewis of some years

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back.

Immediately after the fight both Dumpsey and Lewis were contacted at their respective homes. Both of them emphatically denied that they were anywhere near Madison Arena at the time of the fight. As a matter of fact, both Dumpsey and Lewis report a very strange occurrence.

Lewis and Dumpsey both claim to have been listening to their radios and were tuned into the station broadcasting the fight. Lewis made the startling statement, 'I was listening to Sam Taul broadcasting the preliminary description and just at the point where he said that everyone around the dressing room doors was becoming greatly excited, I seem to have fallen into a sound sleep and don't remember another thing until I seemed to come to as Taul was giving a summing up of the fight. All the people who were sitting around the radio with me, tell me that I was perfectly conscious and was discussing the fight as it progressed. But, I don't remember one thing about it. It looks to me like Curly Thompson is pulling off some kind of voodoo.'

Jack Dumpsey said substantially the same thing as Lewis, and he, too, seems to have fallen into some kind of a coma right after Lewis entered the ring.

It's fairly obvious that Thompson seems to have dipped into some phase of the occult to pull this fight off. However, as this is a sports page, we'll let the proper authorities try to figure out that angle and we'll confine ourselves to other ramifications of the scrap.

DUMPSEY TO BATTLE THE IMMORTAL JOHN L. SULLIVAN

After the blistering bout, of which the blow by blow details will be found in an adjoining column, Thompson floored the still amazed audience by announcing that Dumpsey will meet the long dead, first world's champion, John L. Sullivan, in the Madison Arena in one month.

We're not even going to try to guess how Curly is going to pull off this stunt, but, if he could produce the fight that was staged last night, we're certainly not going to doubt his word about the Dumpsey-Sullivan fracas until someone can show us substantial reasons why we should doubt it.

If Thompson can get Dumpsey into the same ring with a resurrected Sullivan, all we can say is that we'll be treated to a fight spectacle that will never have an equal.

Dumpsey against Sullivan. Dumpsey, the Manhattan Mauler, who in his prime would rather fight than eat in the same ring with Sullivan, the old barroom brawler means the kind of a fight where boxing science is thrown to the winds and a toe-to-toe slugging match determines the winner.

Years back, Sullivan was reported to have slugged into unconsciousness four men with whom he got into a corner saloon fight. That's only one of the many stories handed down through the years attesting to the punching powers of the immortal John L.

Dumpsey, while a wandering youth claims to have killed a steer with a single punch. So fight fans, if the fight comes off as advertised, you're in for the bloodiest fight night you ever have or ever will witness.

We wouldn't miss this fight for a million dollars—if we had it."

CHAPTER VI

THE morning after the fight, Curly was sitting in his hotel room after jubilantly reading and re-reading the fight reports for the sixth time. With a final chuckle of satisfaction, Curly

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threw the paper to the floor and was again startled to see Peter sitting in a chair directly across from him.

"Good morning, Peter," Curly said while still chuckling. "Did you see the papers this morning? Believe me, this town is ours after that fight of last night."

"Judging from your smiles," Peter replied, "I assume that everyone seems to be quite enthused over the happening of the evening."

"Enthused!" Curly exclaimed. "The sports editors have practically gone ga-ga over the fight and they're almost drooling with words about the Dumpsey-Sullivan go."

Peter was about to say something when he was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Come in," Curly jovially called out.

Before Curly had a chance to get to his feet the door swung open and in walked Sheila.

"Sheila!" Curly was so surprised that he almost yelled her name. And, Sheila did present a most attractive picture with a pert hat perched atop her head and a dress that matched the shade of her Irish eyes. For the moment, Curly's surprise was a most pleasant one.

"Gosh, Sheila, you can't imagine how glad I am to see you. You're all I need to make this day one of—." Curly would have kept right on if Sheila hadn't stopped his flow of happy words.

Sheila's first words were cool, almost too polite. "Now, look here, Curly Thompson, I've come here to find out what kind of a racket you're getting yourself mixed up in. I don't like the sound of all this and while you seem to have sold everyone on the idea that you have some mysterious powers," and she wrapped her fingers on the headlined sports sheets to give emphasis to her words, "I happen to know that as late as one week ago, you were still just plain Curly Thompson. Now, what's all this about?"

Curly was on the point of making some kind of a reply when he remembered that Peter was still sitting there. He half turned toward Peter and then said, "Sheila, before we go into that, I would like you to meet my very good friend and associate promoter, Peter."

Peter arose from his chair, his kind eyes twinkling and seemed on the point of making a pleasant acknowledgement of the introduction, but Sheila took the play right away from him. She acknowledged the introduction only by giving Peter a long level glance and then said, "I've never heard of you before, Mr. Peter, but if you're responsible for Curly getting into something shady, you are going to get yourself in some mighty hot water." Sheila's eyes were hot as she stood glaring at Peter.

"Sheila," Curly protested, "You don't understand. Peter is—"

"I understand enough to know," Sheila shot back, "That up to a week ago, you were heavyweight champion of the world and that I was engaged to a pretty fine boy by the name of Curly Thompson. But, what I don't understand is how you ever lost your title to a second-rater like Tony Galena and how you got yourself mixed up in promoting some obviously phony fights. Dumpsey against Lewis and now Dumpsey against Sullivan, a man who has been dead for longer than you've been alive and—and—oh, Curly, you've got me so darn mad that I'm ready to cry." But, the anger had fled from her eyes and now they were filled with unshed tears.

Peter was as calm as ever when he interjected, "Sheila, my dear, you're not being quite fair to Curly. Why not reserve your judgment until Curly has been given an opportunity to convince

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you that he is operating quite legitimately?"

Perhaps Sheila saw in Peter's eyes the same quality that had so rapidly won Curly's confidence. At any rate, her air of belligerency almost vanished and she gave ground gracefully, yet, without beating a complete retreat. "Alright, Mr. Peter, I'm willing to be convinced, but, it will take a lot of explaining to make me believe that Curly, or anyone else can call men through time and place them in a boxing ring."

"I'm sure that a bit of waiting on your part will be most profitable. I know that my opinion doesn't mean very much to you at the moment, but, believe me when I say that you have no cause to doubt Curly. He's a fine, courageous lad," replied Peter.

Sheila threw a swift sideway glance at Curly and answered, "Those were my sentiments, too—until last week." Then turning directly to Curly, she continued, "And, don't you forget Mr. Thompson, what I told you last week. Even if this 'ghost' fighting business of yours turns out to be honest, you still have to redeem yourself for that perfectly miserable exhibition of last month before you can come knocking at the Higgins' door again."

Without giving Peter or Curly an opportunity to reply, Sheila wheeled quickly and walked out of the room.

CURLY looked at Peter ruefully and said, "Well, that's that. I guess I'm all washed up as far as she's concerned."

Peter came as close as he ever did to laughing. "Why, Curly, you don't seem to understand your Sheila one bit. Why, my goodness, you don't suppose that she'd be one bit interested in the honesty of your affairs if she wasn't still very much in love with you."

Still doubtful, Curly started to reply, "I'll be very happy with her if—" when a rap at the door broke into his conversation.

When Curly opened the door a bellboy handed him a telegram which he tore open and scanned rapidly. Peter noticing his frown asked, "Anything wrong, son?"

"I don't know," Curly replied, "The Boxing Commission wants me to appear at their offices this afternoon. Oh, I suppose they want me to produce some proof of the claims we're making. What'll we do about that?"

"First, let us see just what they want and then we'll cross that bridge."

CHAPTER VII

ALTHOUGH Peter had not definitely said that he would appear at the Boxing Commission's office, Curly had just taken it for granted that Peter would be on hand at the appointed time. But, when three o'clock came around and Peter had not made one of his sudden appearances, Curly with a bit of a sinking heart realized that he would have to keep his date with the Commission, alone.

At exactly 3:30, Curly walked into the reception room of the Commission's offices and was immediately admitted to the large council room. As soon as he walked in he realized why he had been asked to appear. Besides the members of the Commission there were seated at the table, Jake Michaels, Tommy Doyle, Rex Richards and several others of the big time Eastern fight promoters.

There was no doubt in Curly's mind that the other promoters had realized immediately that their incomes were facing a serious cut-back if he continued to stage fights like the Dumpsey-Lewis affair. So, he was not at all surprised when Harry Carr, Chairman

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of the Commission opened the meeting by saying, "Mr. Thompson, you have been asked to appear before this board at the insistence of Mr. Michaels and his other colleagues.

"These gentlemen are quite emphatic in their assertions that the fight of last night and your announced bout between Sullivan and Dumpsey can be nothing but fraud, and therefore, they are exercizing their rights in asking you to appear and present evidence to substantiate your claims regarding the participants in these fights.

Mr. Carr and the other members of the board were all substantial business men and Curly knew that their only interests in boxing were to see that all fights were conducted legitimately and according to the laws of the state. Therefore, he felt no resentment toward them, but, he was feeling pretty hot at Michaels and his gang of followers who were always putting the squeeze on the smaller set of fight promoters.

However, Curly kept his naturally inflammable temper under control and said, "There were pictures made of that fight last night. All the papers said that the Boxing Commission had examined carefully and compared them with their own pictures of Dumpsey and Lewis. I guess they must have stacked up okay, or, you'd of said something about it. Why, the papers even gave copies of the pictures to Lewis and Dumpsey and both of them admitted that there was no doubt about them.

"Bellows stood right next to both of them—he was convinced. Donnelly would've known if something smelled because he'd refereed fights a half a dozen times for both of them.

"Now, what other proof does that bunch of chiselers want?" Curly left no doubt about whom he referred to as chiselers because he looked directly at Michaels and the rest of them as they were all seated together.

Michaels immediately jumped to his feet but before the issue could degenerate into a personal argument, Mr. Carr wisely stepped into the breach. "Mr. Thompson, we must admit that every bit of evidence that the Commission has examined gives no indication of fraud.

"However, everything surrounding the fight of last night and the one proposed for next month is so extraordinary that every possible precaution must be taken to see that the public is not made party to a fraud. Therefore, Mr. Thompson, regardless of Mr. Michael's personal interests in this affair, we must admit that he is perfectly justified in asking the Commission to conduct a most thorough investigation and insist on more factual evidence."

Curly knew that Mr. Carr was right, that the fights were so fantastic that the Commission would be out on a limb unless they took every means of convincing themselves that the fight fans weren't being taken for a ride.

So, while Curly was still feeling pretty hot at Michaels, he was quite calm when he said, "Okay, Mr. Carr. I know that this is on the square as far as the Commission is concerned. What kind of evidence do you want me to produce for you?"

Carr's smile was friendly when he saw that Curly was willing to cooperate and he said, "That's fine, Curly. I'm glad you feel that way about it.

"Now, about the evidence, Mr. Michaels insists that the only certain means of identification would be finger-prints. I might add that the Commission agrees with this method and if the finger-prints taken at ringside agree with those that are on record, then we shall be most happy to admit that everything is quite right. Is that

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agreeable to you?"

Curly could think of no objection and replied, "That's okay with me, Mr. Carr. But, how about Sullivan? I don't think they have any finger-prints going that far back."

Michaels answered Curly's question although it had been directed at Mr. Carr. "Well, Thompson, if there're no old prints of Sullivan in the police records, we'll be satisfied if you just match Dumpsey's."

Curly couldn't help becoming a little sarcastic and said, "That's damn generous of you, Michaels."

For a moment it looked like there was going to be another flare-up between Curly and Michaels, but, again the diplomatic Mr. Carr prevented an outbreak of hot words. "I believe, gentlemen, that about concludes all of our business, with one exception."

Curly had a hunch that something big was coming up by the emphasis that had been put on the word "exception" and he looked inquiringly at the Commissioner. Curly's hunch was right, but, the words still carried such a terrific wallop that for a moment Curly felt dizzy and almost nauseated.

Carr said, "Curly, at the insistence of Mr. Michaels, the Commission has voted that you post a $25,000 forfeit guarantee. If, at the ringside, the finger-prints taken of the fighters do not match those on record, you stand to lose the money. Of course, it all goes back to you if the prints match up."

Curly hadn't a lot of available cash prior to the Dumpsey-Lewis fight and the financial loss on that bout had left him just about enough to make arrangements for the Sullivan-Dumpsey battle. So, Carr's words left him with a whirling head and for a few moments he was unable to make any kind of an answer that would satisfy them.

Michaels, mistaking Curly's silence for fear was unwise enough to say "What's the matter, Curly? Getting cold feet?"

That was about all Curly could take and his quick surge of anger cut right through the fog which had been enveloping him. In two strides he was across the room and before anyone could interfere, he had grabbed Michaels by the back of the collar, lifted him in the air and shaking him like he would a little puppy. Michaels wasn't exactly a small man, either.

Curly's words were in time with the shaking he was giving Michaels, "You damn skunk! If you were ten years younger, I'd slap hell out of you." After a final, vicious shake, Curly hurled Michaels back into his chair and the chisler crashed into it with such force that it went over backwards. Before Curly could do any more damage he was surrounded by Carr, other members of the Boxing Commission and some of the newspaper men who were in the room.

Curly cooled off quick and when he saw Carr looking at him with reproach and a certain amount of sympathy in his eyes, he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Carr. I know I shouldn't have done that, but, that little rat over there had it coming to him." Curly had flung out his arm in Michaels' direction as he talked to Carr, and the still quivering Michaels half rose out of his chair as he construed the gesture as the start of another attack.

"I'm sorry, too, Curly," replied Carr, "Because there's going to be some bad publicity on this."

Curly nodded in silent agreement and then said, "I don't know what I can do about the forfeit money. I know I haven't got that much ready dough after the loss I took on that first scrap. All I can do is try to borrow some."

"I'm sorry about that," Carr an-

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swered, "But, we'll give you a little time to raise the necessary money. It will be satisfactory if you post a certified check with us by two weeks from today. In the meantime you can proceed with arrangements for the fight."

Carr arose from his chair signifying that the meeting was over and the reporters rushed out to get the story of the meeting and the row between Michaels and Curly into their offices in time to make the evening editions. Michaels and his crowd remained in the protective custody of the Council room until Curly had passed through the door.

CHAPTER VIII

THAT night the sports pages gave a big splash to the meeting that had ended in a squabble. Most of the sports editors knowing the shady tactics of Michaels, gave Curly the break in their stories. Several of them even intimated that a good beating would have been more appropriate.

The editors had also devoted a good deal of space to the subject of the $25,000 guarantee and were a bit liberal in their sympathies with Curly's apparent inability to raise the money. There was some conjecture as to what Curly had done with the money that he had earned during his championship regime.

But, even the favorable stories in the papers weren't making Curly feel any better. He was in a bad spot and no one knew it any better than he did. Curly hadn't squandered the money he had earned as a champion, but, he had sunk the bulk of it into some long-term investments and annuity insurance. So, with the loss he had taken on the first fight and the money he was spending to promote this one, he had found that he had only about $5,000 ready cash toward the forfeit money.

Curly knew that he could borrow most of it on his insurance policies, but he wasn't going to touch that unless, as a last resort. He had tried to make loans from alleged friends and found them polite in their refusals. So, Curly was feeling pretty low at the moment.

To make matters worse, Peter hadn't put in an appearance and Curly had been counting on him for some helpful advice. Instead when Curly returned to his hotel room, he found a note reading:

Dear Curly:

I know about your current problem, but there isn't very much I can do to help you.

You know, in my business, we don't require money. So, you'll have to work this problem out for yourself. I'm sure that you can.

I have to make a trip and will be unable to return for a few days. I hope your difficulty will be ironed out by that time.

Peter.

So, that night Curly went to bed, having reached a new all-time low. After what seemed endless hours of turning and tossing on his pillow he finally drifted off into a troubled sleep.

The next day dawned clear and bright, but Curly's spirits weren't in keeping with the weather. He dressed slowly while trying to think out his problem and then drifted off to the hotel dining room.

It was while he was sipping his second cup of coffee that he idly flipped the pages of the morning paper to the sports section. The headline he saw was responsible for him dropping the hot cup of coffee which hit the edge of the table, breaking into small fragments and spilling its steaming contents all over Curly's pants. But he seemed

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totally unconscious of that as he stared at the headline:

MYSTERIOUS BACKER POSTS
$25,000 THOMPSON GUARANTEE

THE story following the headline was brief and almost totally devoid of information. All that it said was that a messenger had delivered to the office of the Boxing Commission a certified check in the amount of $25,000 with a brief, typed note saying that it was to be used as the forfeit guarantee for the Sullivan-Dumpsey fight. It had been accepted by the Commission and they had now gone on record as officially sanctioning the fight—until, at least, at such a time as anyone could prove fraud.

Curly was jubilant and all of a sudden he was looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. After the first flush of joy and excitement had worn off, Curly wracked his brains trying to figure out who could have possibly come to his rescue with that amount of cash. It was all very confusing because Curly didn't know one single individual that had the amount of spot dough.

Although Curly didn't have any idea who his unknown benefactor might be, he made a firm resolution that whoever it was would get a substantial return on his investment besides his overwhelming gratitude.

CHAPTER IX

THE days and weeks prior to the fight went rushing by. The sports pages of all papers were filled with almost nothing but stories, predictions and guesses about the coming battle. Some writers, although they were in the great minority, still were skeptical about the whole thing and insisted that there was some kind of trickery involved.

But, as a whole, the papers and writers went for it hook, line and sinker. They raided their files for years back to run down stories on the great John L. They published accounts of his fights, both in the ring and in the saloons. The stories of his prowess grew as they passed from mouth to mouth. And, with each telling, the legendary figure of John L. assumed greater and greater proportions.

Dumpsey, too, came in for his share of raves, and the papers after running his ring history for days were unanimous in their opinions that this would be the greatest slugging match that there ever was or ever could be. The excitement of the public and press amounted almost to mass hysteria as the day of the fight approached.

In desperation, Michaels had arranged a fight between the new heavyweight champion and a prominent challenger to take place the day before the Sullivan-Dumpsey bout. The announcement of that fight didn't even cause a ripple in the fanfare of public excitement. In fact, the average boxing fan if questioned, couldn't have even answered who was fighting the champion or when the fight was to take place. Michaels' scheme to detract from the publicity of the Sullivan-Dumpsey bout was becoming a costly boomerang, a fact which afforded Curly a great deal of satisfaction.

The only sour note in Curly's life was the fact that he was getting nowhere fast with Sheila. He had called her numerous times and on those few occasions that he had been able to talk to her, he had found her polite and friendly, but that was all. Sheila was still waiting to be convinced and Curly could see that he wasn't going to get to first base unless he did *that* convinc-

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ing.

Peter only gave his wise, old smile whenever Curly started to tell him about his troubles with Sheila. Peter's constant reply was, "She's a proud lass, son, and one well worth fighting for." Curly soon learned that he was going to get no help from Peter as far as Sheila was concerned.

Came the day of the great fight. Long before dawn, lines of fans, blocks long, had formed in front of the ticket offices at the stadium. Reserved seats had been sold out for several weeks and the race for general admission tickets amounted almost to a riot. Hundreds of police were there to help maintain order.

Fight-day amounted almost to a complete holiday in the city. Most of the retail establishments realizing that most of their personnel and customers would be at the fight, or, at least, listening to every detail over the radio, closed their doors for the day. The public schools, although they remained open, were receiving hundreds of calls regarding grandmothers who had died during the night. The youngsters, like the adults, were waiting in line for tickets.

Traffic around the stadium became a nightmare. Sweating, swearing traffic cops finally gave up in disgust and left their posts. It didn't really matter because no one was paying any attention to them.

Scalpers were reaping fortunes on their illegal investments and doing it right in front of the police. The city had gone completely fight mad and if anyone would have walked off with the city hall, it is doubtful if anyone would have tried to stop them.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, they opened the arena gates and the tremendous throng surged in like a tidal wave. Scores of people were injured in the crush. That more weren't seriously injured or even killed was almost more than a miracle. It was really a mob spectacle that would live forever in the minds of those who witnessed it.

EVEN the fight-wise Curly was visibly affected by the thrilling scenes. Although fight crowds of all sizes and descriptions were common to Curly, this was something that in his wildest moments of imagination he could never have pictured. Peter, too, was moved by the scenes, although only his eyes showed his excitement and enjoyment.

An hour before fight-time, Curly and Peter were in the dressing room that was to be occupied by Jack Dumpsey. Although Curly had not been a witness to the miracle, Peter had informed him that John L. Sullivan had already been brought back through the years and that he and his handlers were now in the dressing room that had been assigned to them. In just a few more moments, Peter was to bring Dumpsey into the dressing room.

Curly's heart was pounding with excitement. Fighting was in his blood and the thrill of seeing Dumpsey and the immortal John L. Sullivan in the same ring was probably even more thrilling to him than it was to the ordinary boxing fan. Curly recognized that Dumpsey and Sullivan were two of the great masters of the slugging trade.

The police guard had already been posted around Sullivan's room and a mere signal from Curly would produce a cordon of guards around Dumpsey's dressing room. This would be done as soon as Peter had taken care of his part.

Curly had been talking with Peter when he decided on a last-minute inspection of Dumpsey's locker to see that everything was in readiness for him. He had just turned his back to Peter when he was startled to hear a

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strange voice.

"Good evening, Peter."

"Paul! Well, I am surprised to see you here."

Curly whirled around at the sound of the voices and to his astonishment he saw another person in the room. Like Peter, the other man was small, almost fragile in appearance and bore a great resemblance to Peter.

Curly hadn't heard the sound of the door opening or closing and for the moment he was completely baffled as to how this individual had gained entrance to the room. Then something struck home to Curly's brain. Paul! That's what Peter had called the visitor. Paul! Why, it couldn't be anyone else but St.—

Curly's riot of thought was broken when Peter said, "Paul, I want you to meet a young friend of mine, a person whom I regard very highly. Curly, this is Paul, one of my fellow workers."

Curly was almost too dumb with astonishment to acknowledge the introduction, but Paul relived the embarrassment of silence by saying, "I have observed you a great deal the last few days, young man, and now I am very happy to meet you in person."

Curly could only gulp a reply, but Paul had already turned his attention to Peter. For the next few minutes, Curly was just an amazed bystander.

"Peter, my mission here," Paul said, "Is not very pleasant one."

"Now, Paul," Peter replied, "You're not going to do anything to spoil the first vacation I've had in years, are you?" Peter's voice was still very jovial and gay.

Paul answered, "Look, Peter, you're causing all sorts of complications and unless we straighten the matter out between us, I am afraid some higher authorities will intervene."

Peter seemed to become intensely interested now and said, "I'm not sure I know what you mean, Paul. Perhaps you had better explain."

"Well, it simply amounts to this. Somehow or other, no one observed your activities in helping to stage a fight between Joel Lewis and Jack Dumpsey. Had the affair come to our attention, we certainly would have stopped it. And, now we find you right in the midst of the activities of a similar venture. You just can't go on with this thing."

Peter was in dead earnest when he said, "Why not, Paul? What's wrong with it? It's but a little harmless fun."

"Now, Peter, use your head. You're getting our files and records all mixed up. It's impossible for anyone to make a change in the sequence of events in the life of any living individual. That's why you got everything confused when you involved yourself in that other affair and our record keepers had to go to a lot of extra work to straighten out the tangle.

"You can do whatever you want to do with Sullivan because he's already dead and therefore, his file is closed. But you absolutely can not allow Dumpsey to enter that ring tonight. And that's final, Peter, unless you're ready to be called to task quite severely."

Peter's usual bright spirits took a noticeable nose dive. His shoulders drooped and his head bowed slightly. Finally, in a low, discouraged voice, he said, "But what about our young friend here? He has nearly everything invested in this and I can't let him down now."

Paul just shook his head and said, "I'm sorry, Peter, but you'll have to think of some other way out of this. You got the young man into it and I'm afraid that you'll have to get him out of it."

Curly, who had been standing there

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with his tongue frozen, finally managed to blurt out, "You mean we can't put on the fight tonight?"

"Yes, Curly, that's exactly what I mean," answered Paul. Believe me, I'm terribly sorry about it, but you must realize that there are much more important things involved than the money you have invested."

"But, Mr. Paul," argued Curly, "It's not only the money I have in this thing, but some one else has put up a slew of dough and if the fight is called off everyone loses everything. Why—"

PETER broke right into Curly's plea. His troubled brow had lifted and there was an excited gleam in his eyes. "Wait a minute. I've got an idea."

Peter grabbed Paul by the arm and almost pulled him over to the far corner of the dressing room where in excited whispers and gestures he started to pour a stream of words into Paul's ear. Paul listened, at first doubtfully, but as Peter continued, the doubt vanished from his face and gradually be began to smile.

Finally he laughed a bit, shrugged his shoulders and said, "Peter, you're still the same old schemer. It's not exactly an ethical solution, but under the circumstances I think that the subterfuge can be forgiven."

PETER'S eyes were fairly twinkling and he was rubbing his hands together as he turned toward Curly and said, "It's alright, Lad, stop worrying. There will be a fight tonight."

Jubilantly Peter again faced Paul and said, "Won't you stay and watch the fight, Paul? I'm sure you would enjoy it."

For a moment Paul hesitated and then replied, "I'd like to very much, Peter, but I'm afraid that I can't spare the time. You see, your prolonged vacation has given me a great deal of extra work to take care of and I must get back to take care of all the details."

Paul walked over to Curly, placed his hands on his shoulder and in a very soft voice said, "Good luck, tonight, Curly." In another second he had vanished completely and Curly stood there with open mouth and bulging eyes. Things were moving much too fast for Curly to keep pace with them.

Peter came to the point quickly. "Curly, prepare yourself for a shock. You're going to fight Sullivan tonight!"

"Me!" Curly gasped. "Peter, those fans will tear down the arena if I step into the ring instead of Dumpsey. And, what's more, the Boxing Commission will call the fight off if Dumpsey doesn't appear. You've got to think of a better way out than that, Peter."

Peter smiled and answered, "You don't understand, Curly. Look into the mirror over yonder and you'll see what I mean."

Curly almost ran to the mirror on the other side of the room. He couldn't believe what he saw. The image staring back at him was the face of Jack Dumpsey. Dazedly he brushed a hand across his eyes and darted another glance into the mirror and still the image of Jack Dumpsey stared back at him.

Finally Curly got the idea, but in his confusion he was stumbling over his words and his tongue kept getting all twisted up. "You mean—you really mean that I'm going to fight John L. Sullivan?"

"That's right, Curly. That's the only solution to our problem."

Still in a daze, Curly bowed his head to look at his legs, then stretched out his arms and stared at them—the hair, iron arms and legs of Jack Dumpsey. Then the wild look in his eyes started to vanish as comprehension began to dawn. For a few more moments Curly was silent as he watched the still smiling

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Peter. Then slowly he shook his head and said, "No, Peter, it can't work. Sure, I can get in there as Dumpsey, but the fight will be a push-over for Sullivan.

"Don't forget my bad eye—the reason I lost my championship. I guess you don't know it, but Sullivan was a hook artist. Hell, all he'd have to do is toss a couple of those power-house swings on my blind side and the fight would be over. That would be a lousy deal to pull on the fans and I'd feel like a heel."

Peter answered, "You're forgetting, Curly, that you have the body of Jack Dumpsey, not Curly Thompson. All that's left of you is your brain, so you need have no hesitancy to enter the ring tonight and give the people the kind of a fight that they came here to see."

THE completeness of his physical change finally seeped through Curly's head and a little smile came to his lips as he said, "Peter, I've always thought that I'm a pretty good sort of a scrapper and I was always willing to take on anyone at any time. But if anyone would have ever told me that I was going to be in the same ring with John L. Sullivan, I would have put in a hurry-up call for the booby-hatch wagon."

"Wait a minute, Peter, here's something we haven't thought about. What about Jock Kurns and Dumpsey's other handlers? If the real Dumpsey can't be in the ring tonight, the same thing would apply to them."

A little frown creased Peter's brow, but it was there for only a moment. "Well, that can be partially remedied. I can assume the part of Kurns, but it won't be possible for you to have any other seconds in your corner. We can't recruit any others for the job without revealing facts that would be disastrous. I know enough about the duties of a second from watching the proceedings of the last fight, and you can give me a few hints. I probably won't be very helpful, but at least we'll have taken care of the situation."

All of a sudden Curly realized that he was no longer looking at Peter. The person standing in front of him was Jock Kurns, but the change had taken place so rapidly that in his excitement, had completely missed the transformation. However, Curly, by this time, was becoming a bit accustomed to these weird happenings and he merely shook his head a bit as if to clear it of a slight fog.

Just then came a hard knock on the door and a loud voice called out, "Ring time, Mr. Dumpsey." Curly and Peter heard this repeated in front of Sullivan's dressing room.

With a sudden thrill Curly realized that he was going to fight the great John L. Sullivan—the Boston Strong Boy—the hero and winner of hundreds of fights against some of the best fighters that ever lived. Curly was suffering no illusions of grandeur and mentally he wasn't conceding himself much of a chance against the steel-fisted, iron-jawed Sullivan. But every bit of his honest Irish fighting spirit came to the surface and his jaw tightened as he resolved to make a fight that would stir the blood of every fight fan in the arena.

Briefly, Curly gave Peter a few instructions on his duties as a second. Then throwing a bathrobe around himself he said, "Okay, Peter, we're on our way—the brain of Curly Thompson and the body of Jack Dumpsey to slug it out with Sullivan."

The crowd had been watching the dressing-room doors and as Curly and Peter stepped out, the surging tone of the fight crowd swelled to a thunderous roar that beat against roof and

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rafters with all the ferocity of a titanic gale. Curly couldn't help but thrill to the ovation as an escort of police formed in front of them and started to push their way through to the ring. The fans were on their feet screaming words at him that were lost in the bedlam of sound that seemed to be rocking the arena on its foundations.

Curly vaulted into the ring just as Dumpsey would have done, while Peter more sedately climbed through the ropes. Flash bulbs started to explode as photographers fought for advantageous positions from which to take their shots.

With the crowd still going wild, Curly raised his hands over his head and clasped them together in recognition of the acclaim. The gesture served only to increase the clamor which seemed to have no peak. For a few moments Curly stood in the center of the ring and then walked toward his corner.

For a moment the din seemed on the point of subsiding, but the tempo increased with a startling suddenness as the other dressing-room door was thrown open and the crowd spied Sullivan standing there with dramatically folded arms. No robe covered the immense frame of Sullivan and the tremendous proportions of his body and bulging muscles were a sight to behold. Framed in the door behind Sullivan were his three handlers.

Sullivan's march down the aisle to the ring made the screaming fans goggle-eyed. Yelling himself, and waving his arms in the air with a bravado that only Sullivan could attempt, he captured the imagination of the throng. For years fight fans had read about Sullivan's actions and fights. Now they were seeing printed words brought to life and they were eating it up.

Sullivan strode into the ring like a king, walked up and down the squared circle screaming back at those in ringside seats and going through every gesture and action that had marked the career of the immortal John L.

For a few minutes the ring officials allowed him to continue while the crowd roared its approval. Then he was motioned to his corner as the Commission members made ready to take over for matters preliminary to the fight. The mob became silent as they realized what was about to occur.

A small table was brought to the center of the ring and then the announcer quickly introduced members of the Commission and the finger-print expert who would make the examination. Then the crowd got another thrill as the actual Jack Dumpsey was asked to step into the ring. With bated breath the crowd watched him clamber through the ropes, walk over to Curly's corner and stand there staring for several long minutes.

Curly stared back at Dumpsey and almost laughed when he realized the thoughts that must be going through Dumpsey's mind as he stood looking at himself as he was years ago.

Finally, with a helpless sort of a shrug, Dumpsey turned away, walked over to the Commission members standing around the table and said, "Well, if that isn't me sitting over in the corner, I'm either drunk or having a bad dream." Looking very bewildered, Dumpsey climbed out of the ring and resumed his seat at the ringside.

Then Art Bellow announced that there were no available fingerprints of Sullivan but that the comparison would be made of the Dumpsey sitting in the ring and the Dumpsey who had just walked out.

THE expert took a card out of his pocket bearing the certified finger prints of the actual Dumpsey and mo-

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tioned Curly to come forward from his corner. As Curly walked toward ring center the crowd noises hushed completely. The expert took Curly's hand, pressed it against the inked pad and then firmly placed and pressed it on the same card containing Dumpsey's print.

He removed a magnifying glass from his pocket, raised the card to eye level and for long seconds stood studying the two sets of prints. At last he turned to the assembled Commission and slowly and distinctly announced, "Gentlemen, the two prints are absolutely identical."

Of course, the crowd couldn't hear what he said, but, Al Donnelley, the referee shot his clenched fist into the air with thumb extended upwards and again a roar went up as the significance of the gesture was recognized.

Carr, Chairman of the Commission immediately motioned for things to proceed and the fans again came to their feet as they realized that at last the fight was about to start. Bellow tried to make an announcement of introduction but even his amplified voice was drowned in the avalanch of sound. After two attempts he realized the futility and merely waved at each fighter.

Donnelley motioned both fighters to the center, talked briefly, stepped back as the fighters shook hands and then returned to their corners.

The bell rang and the fight was underway.

Sullivan came striding out of his corner, left hand well extended and the right drawn back as far as it could go. Curly came out in the familiar Dumpsey crouch and slowly advanced toward Sullivan. The crowd noise dwindled to a murmur as expectancy made them mute.

Sullivan didn't waste any time. As he neared Curly his body seemed to hurtle the few remaining feet as left hand and then right shot out in hard driving hooks intended for head and body. Both smashes missed by many inches as Curly watching Sullivan intently saw both blows start. Curly almost laughed at the absolute lack of Sullivan's deception. Again Sullivan lashed out and again he was short as Curly backed away.

Sullivan followed Curly, tried two more right-hand punches and grimaced in disgust as Curly nimbly danced aside. Then Sullivan made the crowd-loved gesture—motioning Curly to come in and fight. Curly just smiled and stood there, confidently, gracefully. With a snort of disgust, Sullivan again lunged, swung a right-hand haymaker that went around Curly's head as he came inside of the punch and sank a left and right to Sullivan's mid-section and then jabbed another right to Sullivan's jaw as he went back out of range. Curly went underneath two head punches, uppercutting Sullivan with a right and smashing a left to the ear. John L. didn't even blink as the punches banged home.

Sullivan tried a clumsy left leaving his jaw wide open. Curly stepped in and with every bit of power he could muster smashed home a terrific punch to the chin. The mob gasped as the punch landed and then broke into a roar as Sullivan stood there and laughed. The crowd had seen that kind of a Dumpsey punch before—always followed by the referee counting over a motionless fighter on the canvass.

Curly's jaw fell open as he realized that the hardest punch he could throw had no more effect on John L. than a flea bite. Cautiously Curly circled Sullivan as he quickly revised his fight plans. Curly knew he'd have to hit Sullivan hard and often and try to stay away from the power punches of the Boston brawler. Even this early in

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the fight Curly knew that he'd have to win on boxing skill alone and forget about chances for a knockout.

Again Sullivan leaped forward with right at the head. Curly didn't have time to go under the punch and threw up his left to block it. The impact of the punch threw his own arm back at his face as the pain ran right up to his shoulder. Curly gulped in sheer awe of the tremendous power in Sullivan's smashes and beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead.

SULLIVAN hammered another right at Curly and piled in with a left as the impact threw Curly's arm aside. The left smashed against Curly's side and he felt the ribs bend under the power of the blow. Sullivan was on top of Curly now and lashed out with a right to the head that sent him reeling across the ring. Curly dodged around Sullivan as he charged and banged his own right against the ear. Sullivan wheeled around, caught the still gasping Curly with a right to the body and a left to the jaw and Curly hit the canvas.

In a haze Curly could hear the bedlam of sound and the clang of the bell as the round ended. Peter rushed across the ring and helped Curly to his feet while the crowd was going mad. Wearily Curly slumped to his stool while Sullivan in the other corner just kicked the seat out of the ring and stood disdainfully staring at Curly. A wet towel and the spirits of ammonia brought Curly out of his fog.

To the unspoken question in Peter's eyes he said, "I'm going to fight like hell, Peter, but that guy is like granite."

The bell rang and Sullivan charged out and Curly wisely moved in a circle around him. Sullivan walked in, slowly crowding Curly toward a corner. Curly lashed out with a left to Sullivan's eye and banged home a right in the same spot. Curly felt a ray of hope when he saw Sullivan's eye start to bleed and puff. Sensing a means of victory, Curly feinted a left to the body and then rammed a hard right to the injured eye.

Sullivan's face showed his rage as he wiped a glove across the blood. With more confidence Curly walked in, feinted with left and right and then let go with a left that landed and a hard right to the chin. Two more flashing smashes to the stomach and a driving right to the chin. For the first time, Sullivan wavered, stumbled and then with a desperate strength Curly threw a Sunday punch that caught Sullivan flush on the button. In dismay, Curly saw Sullivan merely step back two paces and look a bit questioningly at him.

Fight reporters and ring wise fans exchanged significant glances as Sullivan failed to crumple to the canvas or even exhibit signs of distress. The crowd saw Dumpsey's mightiest punch explode without even nicking the battling Sullivan and screamed in sheer fighting lust as Sullivan again started to stalk Curly. Then Sullivan really went to work.

With a mighty leap he closed in, rocked Curly with a sweeping left, threw him across the ring with a smashing right and then clubbed home lefts and rights to the face. Curly reeled away and as Sullivan closed in grabbed him in a desperate clinch. Sullivan broke it with a shrug of his bull shoulders and again floored Curly with a terrible right hand hook to the body.

Curly lay gasping for breath on the canvas while Donnelley started the count. At four Curly tried to push up, fell back. Five-Six-Seven-Curly struggled to one knee and with the crowd-noise beating in his ears came to his feet at the count of nine.

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Sullivan rushed from the neutral corner and his wallop went crashing through Curly's strength-drained arms. Curly staggered into his own corner as the bell mercifully ended the round.

Peter swabbed his face with water, rubbed the back of his neck and then fanned him with a towel. Curly felt his strengtth returning after rinsing his mouth and started to study Sullivan who still refused to sit down in his corner.

Motioning Peter to bend down close he said, "Peter, the next round it's going to be all or nothing. I'm going out slugging and I'm not backing up. One of us is going out this round."

Peter helplessly shrugged his shoulders and said, "And, the better man will win, Curly."

The bell clanged for the third round and the crowd let out a roar as Curly charged across the ring catching Sullivan before he had time to move. Curly was throwing punches-left-right-left-right and they were smacking in fast and hard. Sullivan tried to fight back, was off balance and took five more hard punches. Another terrific right from Curly knocked Sullivan into the ropes and a left snapped his head back. The crowd was going mad as the tide of the fight turned.

Sullivan walked in swinging and ran into a scorching right hand. Curly sensed the advantage, came in low and belted two stiff rights to the mid-section. Sullivan gasped, his arms went down to his sides and Curly stepped in with a hard, hard punch that landed low on Sullivan's jaw. Sullivan dropped, took a count of eight and came up fighting as the crowd went into a frenzy.

Toe-to-toe they traded punches taking and giving punches, neither one backing an inch. How long can flesh and bone stand it?

Curly felt a hard punch to the heart, staggered dizzily and then Sullivan nailed him with a long left and a pile driving right. Another right to the head and Curly went down. —5-6— Curly dimly saw the referee—7-8— Curly's head cleared and at nine he was on his feet.

Sullivan gave him no rest. Another swinging right—another left and Curly went down again—on his back. He couldn't hear the count but came up. He saw the punches coming—couldn't stop them—couldn't avoid them—felt no pain as they landed—only a dull shock. Weakly he pawed out, missed and saw gloves exploding in his face. Sullivan came in viciously, throwing punches at an unprotected body.

Curly never felt the next punch—didn't even hear the referee or the mad screaming of the crowd as the count reached ten. Curly had given his all and his body had collapsed from the furious punches.

CHAPTER X

CURLY came to in the dressing room. He opened his eyes, stared blankly at the ceiling from his prone position on the rubbing table and then saw Peter and—Sheila at his side.

Sheila had been crying. Curly could see the tears in her eyes. He reached up his hand and she took it with both of hers. Peter was wearing his usual smile.

Curly hastily sat up on the table, glanced in the mirror and saw that once again he was Curly Thompson.

Sheila knew the whole story. Curly could tell that by looking at her. "How did you find out?" were his first words.

"Oh, Curly, I've been such a fool. I heard the whole thing when I was about to come in the dressing room looking for you. And, I've got the nerve to ask to be forgiven."

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Then she continued a bit more coyly, "After all, Pop and I didn't really believe you were a bum. You see, we were the ones who put up the forfeit money."

"Sheila," Curly said, "You lovely, little conniving—" That was as far as Curly got because Sheila planted a kiss right on his lips and then his arms went around her.

They both heard a dry, little chuckle and whirled around—the room was empty.

Then as from a distance, with the voice growing ever fainter, "The winner and still champion."

MYSTERY MEN OF SCIENCE

NOSTRADAMUS—HISTORIAN OF THE FUTURE

By GARY LEE HORTON

WOULD you like to know if the atomic bomb will ever be used in warfare, if the world government envisioned by the United Nations will succeed, or what nation will be most powerful fifty years hence? Perhaps the answers to these questions can be found by consulting a book of verses called the "Prophetic Centuries," written by a man who died in 1566.

No one knows how Nostradamus concocted this set of cryptic verses, but all over the world there are scholars who proclaim the wonders of his prophetic feats. To his credit goes the prediction of the lightning bombing of Pearl Harbor, the fall of France, and the advent of Mussolini and Hitler (the latter by name). He is claimed to have described tanks and airplanes, and to have determined the exact number of delegates at the Pan-American conference.

The early life of Nostradamus gives no clue to his amazing power of seeing beyond his own times into the world-shaking events of centuries to come. He was born in St. Remy, Provence, on the 14th of December, 1503. As a child he was a mathematical prodigy, but turned his attentions to medicine, becoming a famous French physician. In the Great Plague, he lost his wife and children. Later, his skill brought him to the attention of the Throne, and he was made court cosmetician to Catherine de Medici, Queen of France. Finally he entered a monastery, and there he remained till his death, spending his days evolving his formula for prophecy, compounded out of astrology, astronomy, mathematics, and some wondrous secret ingredient, unknown to the human mind.

A student of history would do well to consult the verses of Nostradamus for complete detailed accounts of world events like this one, unmistakably of the French Revolution:

"Affairs will go too well, the King too yielding,
He changes his mind constantly, too negligent, then sudden.
He will follow the whims of his light but loyal wife
And his very benevolence will cause his death."

What better description could be afforded of the weak King Louis XVI who brought destruction upon himself, by tolerating the escapades of Marie Antoinette, leading a prosperous nation to bankruptcy, and paving the way for the revolution. On this subject, Nostradamus prophesied further: "In the night there will come into the forest . . .
Two fugitives . . .
The black monk in gray in Varennes,
And the consequences are tempests, fire, and the cutting-off . . ."

Indeed, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette did flee Paris on June 20, 1789, disguised as monks, but they were discovered in the forest of Varennes, and brought back to Paris where they were guillotined.

The "Prophetic Centuries" also contained a verse about Napoleon, who married an Austrian and had Polish and Egyptian mistresses:

"No French king ever had his name;
Never was a lightning so much feared.
Italy, Spain, and the English shall tremble;
He will be attracted to foreign women."

The translation of the verses has long been a problem for scholars. In those days, anyone who was suspected of supernatural powers was burned as a witch or put to death by the inquisitors of Spain. In order to protect himself, Nostradamus wrote in medieval slang, so involved that it is almost impossible to make a literal translation of even those colloquialisms which still exist.

Having no publisher, Nostradamus printed his verses in pamphlet form and passed them out like handbills. One thousand of these verses were written between the years 1553-1559. It was not until 1604 that the collection was assembled in book form. The English translation, printed in London by a Frenchman named de Garencieres, appeared in 1672. There is a copy of the 1604 folio in the British Museum, and one of the de

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Garencieres edition in the New York Public Library.

Sometimes, the interpretation requires much unraveling. The following is one of these:

"When the fork is supported by two pillars,
With six half horns and six open scissors,
That powerful lord, heir of the Toads
Will then subjugate to himself
Most of the civilized world . . ."

The explanation is as fascinating as the prediction. The fork is the letter V, which, when supported by two pillars, or straight lines, becomes the letter M, or the Roman numeral for 1000. Half of a horn makes the letter C, the Roman numeral for 100, and six of these make 600. Add this to the M and you have the year 1600. The open scissors is symbolic of the letter X, or 10. Six of these make 60. What did happen in the year 1660? At that time, Louis XIV made a marriage of convenience with Maria Theresa of Spain, thus subjugating under his rule, most of the civilized world. The phrase "Heir of the Toads" is accounted for by the fact that the Merovingian family of Louis XIV carried on its coat of arms, two toads.

For those of the younger generation who desire to know what the future holds in store, Nostradamus leaves this parting and horrifyingly prophetic thought:

"In the year one thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine
From the sky will come a terrible king.
This king, coming from Asia
Will descend on Paris and destroy it."

SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS

☆ By FRAN FERRIS ☆

THE number 3 has always been considered the lucky number. You often hear that the third attempt was successful. Three also has the ring of finality about it. In baseball it's three strikes and you're out. In drowning they say you go down for the third and last time.

The trisula (tri-3, sula-point) is a symbol of great antiquity. The trident of Neptune is an example, as it is believed to symbolize the third place the sea holds over heaven and air. The trisula placed on a pillar with flames is the monogram of Buddha. According to Plutarch, the trisula typified the concept of being—the Eternal and Ever Living, as opposed to constant change—the alternate death and resurrection, which to orthodox religious minds is implicit in the natural world. The magical triple number has figured in all the major religious systems. The Babylonian godhead was a three-fold deity represented by Anu, Ea, and Bel. The triad of the Brahmins is represented by Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Siva, the Destroyer. The number 3 appears in the advent of Christianity. There is the Holy Trinity—the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost; Mary, Joseph and Jesus—the Holy Family; and Jesus and the two thieves on the three crosses of Cavalry.

Next to the number 3, 7 seems to have aroused the greatest mystical interest of the ancients. Seven is the sacred number of the Hebrews, meaning perfection or completion. There are hundreds of references to 7 in the Bible. Of course, God rested on the seventh day, and this number was used whenever any holy event needed a numerical description. The ancients thought of the universe as having the earth in the center with the seven heavenly bodies circling it. The Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. They worshipped these bodies as the Seven Great Gods. In China and Japan the Seven Precious Things are gold, silver, rubies, emeralds, crystal, amber and agate. The Seven Buddhists Jewels were the Golden Wheel, Lovely female escorts, horses, elephants, divine guardians of the treasury, ministers in command of the army, and the wonder-working pearl. There are Seven Wonders of the World.

Antipater of Sidon in the second century listed them as the Walls of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus by Phidias, the hanging gardens of Babylon, the Colossus of Rhodes, the Pyramids of Egypt, the mausoleum at Halicarnassus, and the temple of Artemis at Ephesus. There were seven sages of Greek antiquity. There were the Seven Wise Masters of Europe in the Middle Ages. There were the Seven Churches of Asia and the Seven Liberal Arts. All this is a long way from the "seven, come 'leven" of the modern dice game, but it is an appeal to the lucky number in each case.

Thirteen has for centuries been the number associated with ill-luck, probably because thirteen (Jesus and the twelve disciples) sat at the table together just before Jesus was arrested and crucified. Few people today enjoy sitting down to a table of thirteen. Hotels usually make it a rule to skip the thirteenth floor and go from the twelfth to the fourteenth. Room number 13 is usually omitted from any building catering to the public.

There are some people who defy the ill-luck of the number thirteen and associate themselves with this number on every occasion. Woodrow Wilson was one such person. He preferred the thirteenth day of the month to make and announce important decisions, and associated his activities with this number whenever possible. That is why he dropped his first name, Thomas, and used only his middle and last name, Woodrow Wilson, which consisted of thirteen letters.

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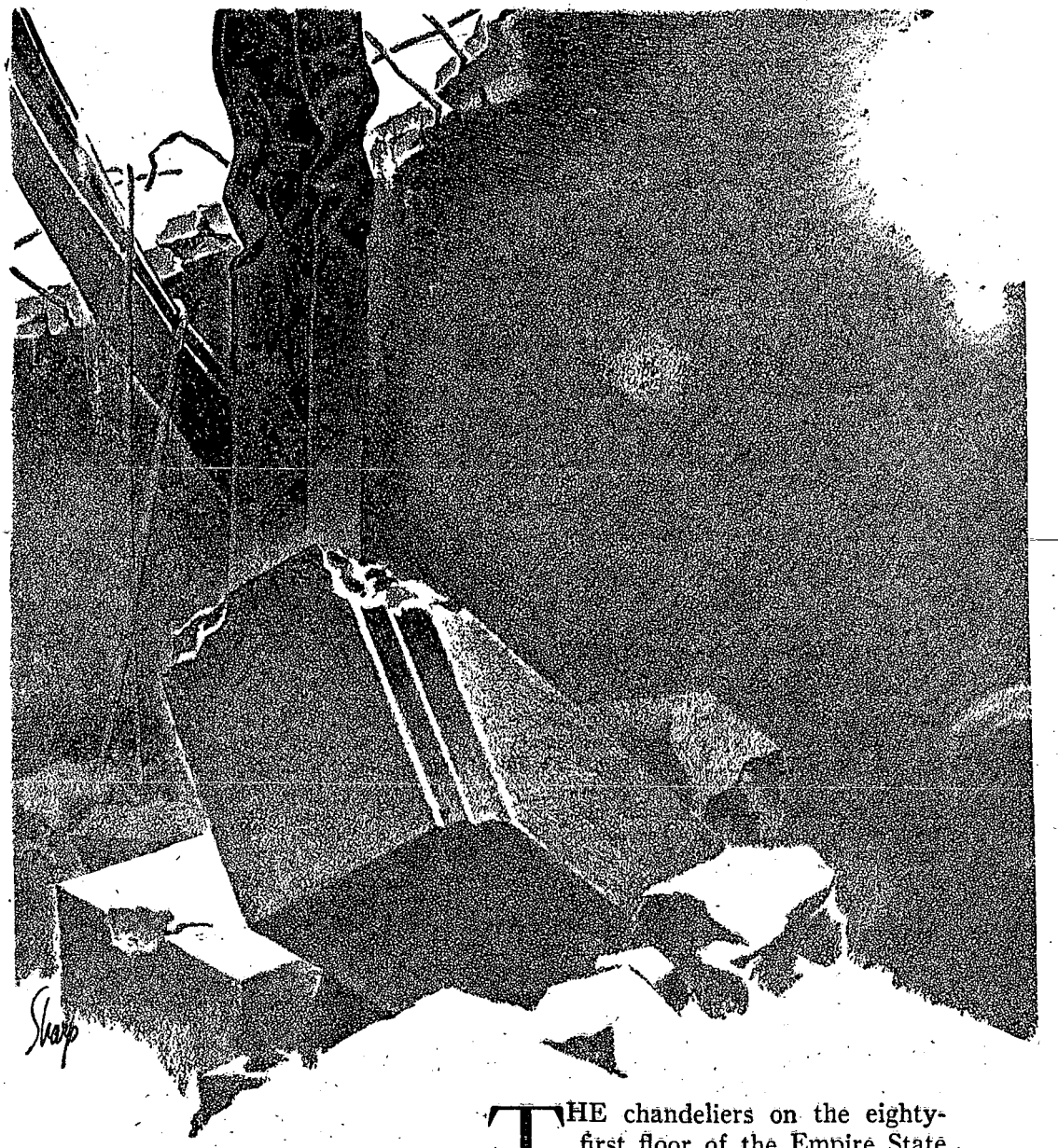

Vernon Drecksall wrote his music from the heart. But music can be heartbreaking

THE chandeliers on the eighty-first floor of the Empire State building swung wildly without any reason. A company of soldiers marched over a new, well-built bridge, and it collapsed. Enrico Caruso filled his lungs and sang, and the crystal glass before him shattered.

And Vernon Drecksall composed his Largo.

He composed it in hotel rooms and scored it on trains and ships, and it took

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LARGO

by Theodore Sturgeon

The music took a turn then and began a theme that was overwhelming in its scope

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more than twenty-two years. He started it in the days when smoke hung over the city, because factories used coal instead of broadcast power; when men spoke to men over wires and never saw each other's faces; when the nations of earth were ruled by the greed of a man or the greed of men. During the Thirty Days War and the Great Change which followed it, he labored; and he finished it on the day of his death.

It was music. That is a silly, inarticulate phrase. I heard a woman say "Thank you" to the doctor who cured her cancer, and then she cried, for the words said so little. I knew a man who was born lonely, and whose lonliness increased as he lived until it was a terrible thing. And then he met the girl he was to marry, and one night he said, "I love you." Just words; but they filled the incredibly vast emptiness within him; filled it completely, so that there was enough left over to spill out in three syllables, eight letters . . . The Largo—it was music. Break away from individual words; separate yourself from the meaning of them strung together, and try to imagine music like Drecksall's Largo in E Flat. Each note was more than polished—burnished. As music is defined as a succession of notes, so the Largo was a thing surpassing music; for its rests, its upbeats, its melodic pauses were silences blended in harmony, in discord. Only Drecksall's genius could give tangible, recognizable tone to silence. The music created scales and keys and chords of silence, which played in exquisite counterpoint with the audible themes.

It was dedicated to Drecksall himself, because he was a true genius, which means that everything in the universe which was not a part of him existed for him. But the Largo was written for Wylie, and inspired by Gretel.

They were all young when they met. It was at a summer resort, one of those strange outposts of city settlement houses. The guests were plumbers and artists and bankers and stenographers and gravicab drivers and students. Pascal Wylie was shrewd and stocky, and came there to squander a small inheritance at a place where people would be impressed by it. He had himself convinced that when the paltry thousands were gone he could ease himself into a position where more could be gotten by someone else's efforts. Unfortunately this was quite true. It is hardly just, but people like that can always find a moneymaker to whom their parastism is indispensible.

GRETEL was one of the students. Without enthusiasm, she attended a school in the city which taught a trade for which she was not fitted and which would not have supported her if she had been. Wylie's feminine counterpart, she was spending her marriageable years as he spent his money, in places where it would impress others less fortunate. Like him, she lived in a passively certain expectation that when her unearned assets were gone, the future would replace them. Her most valuable possession was a quick smile and a swifter glance, which she used very often—whenever, in fact, a remark was made in her presence which she did not understand. The smile and the glance were humorous and understanding and completely misleading. The subtler the remark, the quicker her reaction. Her rather full lips she held slightly parted, and one watched them to catch the brilliantly wise thought they were about to utter. They never did. She was always surrounded by quasi-sophisticates and pseudo-intellectuals whose conversation got farther and farther above her silly head until

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she retreated behind one slightly raised golden eyebrow, her whole manner indicating that the company was clever, but a bit below her. She was unbelievably dumb and an utterly fascinating person to know slightly.

Vernon Drecksall washed pots and groomed vegetables for the waspish cook. He had a violin and he cared about little else, but he had discovered that to be able to play he must eat, and this job served to harness his soul to earth, where it did not belong. He got as many dollars each week as he worked hours each day, an arrangement which was quite satisfactory by his peculiar standards.

Each night after Drecksall had scoured the last of his eight dozen pots, disposed of his three bushels of garbage, and swabbed down an acre and a half of floor-space, he went to his room for his violin and then headed for the privacy of distance. Up into the forest on an rocky trail that took him to the brink of a hilltop lake he would go; beating through thick undergrowth he reached a granite boulder that shouldered out into the water at the end of a point. Night after night he stood there on that natural stage and played with almost heartbreaking abandon. Before him stretched the warm, black water, studded with starlight, like the eyes of an audience. Like the glow of an usher's torch, the riding lights of a passing heliplane would move over the water. Like the breathing of twenty thousand spellbound people, the water pressed and stroked and rustled on the bank. But there was never any applause. That suited his mood. They didn't applaud Lincoln at Gettysburg either.

Every ten days the pot-walloper was given a day off, which meant that he worked only until noon, which, again, generally turned out to be four in the afternoon after various emergency odds and ends had been taken care of. Then he had the privilege of circulating among people who disliked him on sight while he mourned that the woods were full of vandals and the lake was full of boats and the tele-juke box was incapable of anything but rhythmically insincere approaches to total discord. He didn't look forward to his days off, until he saw Gretel.

SHE was sitting on an ancient Hammond electric organ, staring off into space, and thinking about absolutely nothing. The mountain sunset streamed through a window behind her, making her hair a halo and her profiled body the only thing in the universe fit to be framed by that glorious light. Drecksall was unprepared for the sight; he was blinded and enslaved. He didn't believe her. She must be music. It was, for him, a perfectly rational conclusion, for she was past all understanding, and until now nothing not musical had struck him that way. He moved over to her and told her so. He was not trying to be poetic when he said, "Someone played you on the organ, and you were too lovely to come out as sound." He was simply stating what he believed.

She sat above him and turned her head. She gave him an unfathomable half-smile, and as she drew her breath the golden glow from behind her crept around her cheek and tinted the arched flesh of her nostrils. It was an exquisite gesture; she saw in his eyes that she had pleased him and thought "He stinks of grease and ammonia."

He put out his hand and touched her. He was actually afraid that she would slip back into a swelling of symphonic sound, sweep over him and be gone past all remembering.

"Are you a real woman who will be

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alive?" he faltered.

Stupid questions are not always stupid to stupid people. "Of course," she said.

Then he asked her to marry him.

She looked at his craggy face and boniness and his hollow chest and mad-looking eyes and shook her head. He backed away from her, turned and ran. He looked once over his shoulder, and caught the picture of her that lighted his brain until the day he died. For there, in light and shade, in warm flesh and cool colors, was the Largo; and he would have to live until he turned her back into music. He could not command her as she was; but if he could duplicate her in sharps and flats and heart-stopping syncopation, then she would be his. As he ran, staring back, his head *thwacked* on the doorpost, and he staggered on, all blood and tears.

Gretel looked pensively at her fingernails. "Good God," she said, "what a dope." And she went back to her cowlike mental vacancy.

A couple of nights later Gretel and Pascal Wylie were in a canoe on the hilltop lake, blandly violating the sacredness Drecksall had invested in her, when they heard music.

"What's that?" said Wylie sharply.

"Vi'lin," said Gretel. For her the subject closed with an almost audible snap, but Wylie's peering mind was diverted; and seeing this, she accepted it without protest, as she accepted all things. "Wonder who it is?" said Wylie. He touched a lever, and the silent solenoid-impulse motor in the stern of the canoe wafted them toward the sound.

"It's that kitchen-boy!" whispered Wylie a moment later.

Gretel roused herself enough to look. "He's crazy," she said coldly. She wished vaguely that Wylie would take her away from the sound of the violin, or that Drecksall would stop playing. Or—play something else. She had never heard these notes before, which was not surprising considering the kind of music Drecksall played. But such music had never bothered her until now. Very little ever bothered her. She made an almost recognizable effort to understand why she didn't like it, realized that it made her feel ashamed, assumed that she was ashamed because she was out with Wylie, and dropped the matter. Having reasoned past the music itself, she was no longer interested. She might have been had she realized that it was her own portrait in someone else's eyes that she had listened to.

WYLIE felt himself stirred too, but differently. It didn't matter to him why this scullery lad was scraping a fiddle on the lakeshore when he should have been asleep. The thing that struck him was that the man could make that violin talk. He made it get inside you —inside people who didn't give a damn, like Wylie. Wylie began to wonder why the hands that performed that way had taken on a duty of washing pots. He had learned early that the best way to get along (to him that meant to get rich) was to find your best talent and exploit it. Here was a man wasting a talent on trees and fish.

Music is a science as well as an art, and it is a shocking thing to those who think that musicians are by nature incompetent and impractical, to discover that more often than not a musician has a strong mechanical flair. Conversely, a person who is unmechanical is seldom musical. Drecksall's playing on this particular night was careful, thoughtful, precise. He was building something quite as tangible to him as a bridge is to an engineer. The future whole was

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awe-inspiring, beautiful, but, like the bridge, it was composed of quite unromantic essentials—tonal nuts, bolts and rivets. It was the skillful machining of these that intrigued Wylie, possibly far more that would the completed work.

Drecksall paused at the end of a bewildering arpeggio, and stood with his violin in his hand, staring puzzledly across the water. He had just realized the enormity of his task, and was completely wrapped up in it, so was totally unprepared for Wylie's sudden burst of clapping. It was not applause, exactly; Wylie was gladhanding, following the birth of a bright idea. He had an idea he would butter up the violinist, befriend him, get him to someone who would know if he was really any good or not from a commercial point of view. If he was, Wylie could take a cut, maybe. Ten percent—forty—seventy-five? Drecksall was young. He would last a long time, and he looked like a dope.

So he cracked his lean hands together and whistled shrilly, like a grandfather at a burlesk house. Surely the ape would appreciate enthusiasm!

Drecksall leapt like a startled moose, nearly lost his footing, and then froze, peering toward the dark canoe, a hot smoke of anger curling into his brain. He felt stripped, imposed upon. He felt kicked. His night playing demanded infinitely more privacy than his body, and it was being rudely stared at. He suddenly broke the violin over his knee, hurled the pieces at the canoe, and ran into the dark woods.

"I told you he was crazy," said Gretel complacently.

It was a long time before Pascal Wylie could puff the wind back into his sails.

TWO days later Drecksall was returing from a copse a hundred yards from the resort's main building, carrying a couple of large garbage pails. There was an incinerator back there, and as he left it he heard the whirring of rotary wings. He looked up and saw a cab descending, and would have ignored it altogether had he not noticed that the man who climbed out and paid the driver had a violin-case under his arm. Drecksall looked at it the way a prep-school boy looks at a soft-drink calendar.

"Hi," said Pascal Wylie. Drecksall nodded.

"I want to talk to you," said Wylie.

"Me?" Drecksall couldn't take his eyes off the violin.

"Yeh. Heard you lost your fiddle."

Drecksall just stared. Wylie grinned and handed over the instrument. Drecksall dropped his garbage cans, clasped the case and clawed it open. The violin was a good one, complete with three bows, spare strings, and a pitch pipe. Drecksall stood helplessly, his wide mouth trying fruitlessly to say the same thing his eyes were saying.

"You want that violin?" asked Wylie briskly. The question needed no answer. "It's yours if you'll do me a favor."

"What?"

Wylie gestured toward the cab. "Just hop in there with me. We'll run into the city, and you'll play that thing for a friend of mine. Chances are that after he hears you you can go right on playing as long as you want to, and you'll never wash another pot. How's it strike you?"

Drecksall looked at the tumbled garbage cans. "I can't leave here," he said. "I'd lose my job."

Wylie was not thinking about that. If the violinist failed the audition, he would starve — and he could, for all Wylie cared. But he thought the man had a chance. He snatched the violin

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and walked toward the cab. "Okay, then."

Drecksall picked up the cans and stared after Wylie. His would-be manager climbed in, giving not a backward glance. With elaborate carelessness, however, he did manage to have a great deal of difficulty in getting the violin-case in after him. It hung, black and shining and desirable, for seconds; and suddenly Drecksall realized just how badly those cans smelled. He ran to the cab and climbed in.

"Good boy," said Wylie.

Drecksall took the violin-case from him and opened it. "I never had a violin as nice as this before," he said simply.

The audition went off smoothly. Drecksall was led into a soundproof room containing a novachord and an unpleasing female organist. He was handed a sheaf of sheet music which, but for the individual titles, he thereafter ignored. A red light flashed, a a speaker baffle said boredy, "Go ahead, please," and Drecksall played. He played for an hour, stopping twice in the middle of selections to tune his violin, which was new and springy, and once to upbraid the organist, who, after the first few bars, had never played better in her life.

Afterward, in another room, Wylie was called in to speak to an official. He crossed the room and, with his hat on, perched easily on the edge of the man's desk and looked at his fingernails until the man spoke.

"You're this fellow's manager?"

"Mmm."

"Eight hundred for thirty minutes five times weekly, thirteen weeks." He dragged a contract form out of the desk, filled in some spaces, and shoved it over to Wylie. Wylie looked at it gingerly as if it was one of Drecksall's garbage pails, took the pen, crossed out the $800 and wrote in $5000. Then he yawned and looked out of the window.

"Don't be silly," said the radio executive. He looked keenly at Wylie, sighed, and drew up another contract. It was for two thousand. Wylie signed with alacrity. "Make that out in two checks, payable to cash," he said. "One eighteen hundred, and one two hundred."

The man behind the desk made out the checks. "Yours is the ten percent check?" he asked. Wylie smiled.

"I think you're a heel," said the exec, and handed the papers over.

At the door, Wylie tipped his hat and grinned. "Thank you very much, sir," he said. He went and found Drecksall and gave him his check. "Go buy yourself some clothes," he said. Drecksall looked at it and gasped.

"Two hundred dollars?"

Wylie nodded. "You're hired. Let's get out of here."

THAT was only the beginning. Wylie knew an amazing number of people, and before the year was out, Drecksall was nationally known. Money poured in, and, as Wylie was shrewd as well as slick, he saw to it that Drecksall got plenty. Since there was so much always on hand, Drecksall never questioned the cut that Wylie took, and Wylie was remarkably secretive about where he put his own money.

And one other thing of importance happened.

One afternoon Drecksall hurried home to the apartment he shared with Wylie in Safrisco. It was a quietly elaborate place, and it included the one thing Drecksall demanded—a totally soundproofed practice room. Flinging open the door, Drecksall was halfway across the sumptuous living room before he quite realized that on entering

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he had seen someone else in the room. He swung around, staring.

"Hello," said Gretel. She set down her drink and swung her feet off the couch. "Remember me?"

Drecksall nodded silently, watching her, stripping gloves off his hands.

"You're changed," he said after a bit, looking at her clothes, her hair.

"I should be." She smiled vapidly. "I'm married."

"Oh." It penetrated slowly. "Who to?"

"Pascal."

"He—he changed you?"

Gretel's bird-brain manufactured a bird's laugh. "Sure."

"Good God," whispered Drecksall in disgust. He went into his room and closed the door. He had just begun to hate Wylie.

Gretel picked up her drink again. "He's still crazy," she said.

IN NEARLY all things Vernon Drecksall was as reasonably sane as the rest of us; but he was a monomaniac, and he could hardly be blamed for assuming the things he did. He and his odd conception of Gretel were made for each other. He was the form-fitting husk for his vision of her, and she had filled it completely. She could never do so again, because so much of that vision was composed of sunset gold and purple shadow and that unforgettable tinge of ping when the light shone through her nostril. He could not be expected to understand that. He only knew that the vision didn't fit any more; that something had happened to change her from that utter perfection. And he had her own word for it that Pascal Wylie was that thing. He slumped into the most driving kind of misery. He couldn't see that there was anything he could do about it except to go ahead with his building. Some day he would have her back. Some day she would emerge from his violin in a great bubble of melody which would settle before him, open up and reveal her there as she had been on that summer evening. And she would be his. Toward that iridescent ideal, he strove. Hour upon hour, alone in his soundproofed cell, he wrought the Largo. Sometimes he was rewarded by sustained flashes of completion. He had a phrase for her hair, a swift run for her strange eyes as she turned her head, a dazzling contrapuntal passage for the sound of her voice. Each little detail that was mastered was carefully scored, and he would play them jealously now and again, seeing his visions, spurring himself on to represent the duller notes which represented the more prosaic part of the picture—the window-frame behind her, the scratched surface of the old Hammond organ, the crack at the side of her shoe.

During the war, and the ruinous period afterward, he was glad that there was no longer any time for concerts or broadcasts or public appearances, for it left him time to work. Deep in the heart of a half-ruined hotel he labored by candlelight, while the three great counter-revolutions rolled and swirled around his little citadel of silence. Twice he saw Pascal Wylie in a gibbering state of fear; both times he had thrown him bodily out of his practice-room, ignoring his pleading and his warning that they were all going to be shot. Wylie was in politics up to his ears and over, though fortunately for him he had stayed in the background and let dollars speak for him. When it was all over and the exhausted world began to build again, Drecksall was possibly the only man alive who neither knew nor cared what had happened. He had been touched by it too; his investments were completely wiped out,

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but that meant nothing to him. He was certain that there would be more, and he was right. The Great Change was on, and with the nation's rebirth there was plenty for such as he.

And so the years swept by him as had the violence of war and revolution and renascence. Time left him alone, and it was with something of a shock that Wylie, during that rocky period, realized that the strange creature was the only solid, unchanging thing in the universe. Gretel changed by the day, for hers was the scintillant peasant beauty that fades early. She gave every promise of finally occupying some chimney-corner until she grew into a gargoyle and became part of the mantel. Wylie cared for her casually from force of habit, and bent his efforts to rebuilding his fortune. And Drecksall played.

SOMETHING else was creeping into the building of the Largo. The central theme itself, that breathing, mutant reproduction of Gretel, was being framed in a darker, deeper mass of tones. It was a thing like hatred, like vengeance, that frame. It was Pascal Wylie, and it wound round and about the thing that was Gretel. This was not mere music. This was something more definite than even Drecksall's crazed kind of music. It was the outline, the detailed description, of a definite plan of action. The same impulse that drove him to do something about his vanished Gretel was forcing him to deal, in his own way, with Wylie.

There came a time when Drecksall felt that the Largo was nearly complete. It would need more than scoring for the composition to be fully rounded. It would need an audience, and it would need a setting. It couldn't be played in any ordinary concert hall, nor in the open air. For its full effect, it must needs be played in an auditorium built for it, and it alone.

A building like that never existed, nor did Drecksall expect it to. He built it himself. It took two years or more. It cost thousands—so much, indeed, that he went to Wylie for more; and Wylie, fearing that he would begin asking questions, gave him more and more of his own earnings, telling him blandly that theater managers and the broadcasting chains were paying more these days. Drecksall didn't care, as long as he got enough for his purpose.

He had no end of trouble. It was months before he found an engineer who would dare attempt the auditorium, more months before he found one who could be convinced that he meant what he said when he gave his specifications. They were to be followed to the thousandth of a millimeter, and Drecksall's rages when he saw tiny variations on the blueprints were really beautiful to behold. In time, the indignant words, "After all, Mr. Drecksall, I'm a graduate engineer, and while you may be the world's foremost violinist, you are not qualified to—" became real poison to him. After breaking up a few expensive violins and accessories over their erudite heads, he gave up personal visits from architects and contractors and handled the thing vitriolically, by mail.

But when the auditorium was finished, it was what he had ordered, from the bedrock and soil he had specified to the top of the heavy square tower. It was certainly a strange affair. It was not very large, and looked like the conventionalized nose of a space cruiser. Its walls were thin at the bottom, thick and massive at its domed top. Inside, the basic construction was easily seen. It was made of thirty-eight arches all joining at the top and forming the circular walls at the sides and base. The tower was squat and massive; solid,

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steel-reinforced concrete. There were no windows, and the door was self-sealing, and integral part of its wall. It was lighted from a fixture which also was built into the contours of the wall. The only thing that detracted from that symphony of metrical lines on the interior wall was a heavy concrete block that jutted out over a stone chair—high over it. On the other side of the chamber was another such chair, but the wall over it was like all the others. At the exact center of the building was a tiny red tile, set into the floor, and this was the only indication of a stage, a place from which to perform. It was certainly a strange creation; but then, it had been built for a strange purpose.

DRECKSALL made his demands several weeks before he intended to play the Largo, because he expected resistance. He got it. Wylie failed to see why he should sit through a highly involved musical masterpiece when he had never cared particularly for music; why he should go out into the wilds, miles from the nearest city, to hear it; why it couldn't be played in the apartment or at their country place; and most particularly, why he should rouse Gretel from the intellectual stupor she had fallen into these last years and drag her out there to the auditorium. Drecksall heard him out patiently, said, "It really isn't much to ask," and left the room. He was back in a moment with his concert violin which he wrapped carefully in a plexiskin and put away in its case. "I'm not going to play again," he said quietly, "until I play the Largo for you and Gretel, in my auditorium." Then, leaving Wylie to give puzzled shrugs at the violin-case, he went out.

It took just forty-eight hours for Wylie to discover that Drecksall was really serious, for it was that long before the violinist had an engagement. Wylie got into his soup and fish, went to call Drecksall, and found him sprawled smiling on the couch of his practice room. He refused to go. Fuming, Wylie canceled the concert. He didn't give in on that occasion, nor on the next, but when he read a note on one of the fasci-papers to the effect that the Old Master was at long last developing temperament, and that perhaps the word "maybe" should be inserted before the date of each of his scheduled concerts, Wylie broke down, at last asking himself why he had made an issue of it at all. Drecksall had been easy enough to get along with.

And at long last they hired a heliplane and whirred the long miles out to the auditorium. As they landed, Wylie broke his glum silence to ask, "How long'll we be here?"

"I couldn't say," grinned Drecksall happily.

"How long will it take to play the thing?"

"About an hour."

"Shall I tell him to come back in about that time?" asked Wylie, nodding toward the cab-driver.

Drecksall alighted from the cab and helped Gretel out. "If you like;" he said.

The plane shot away and they walked up the rough trail toward the auditorium. "That the place?" asked Wylie.

"That's the place."

Wylie looked at it. "Hell! What did you go and spend all that jack on that place for? Why, it wouldn't hold fifty people!"

"It wasn't meant to," said Drecksall gently.

They reached the door—that is, the point where the path ended against the wall. Drecksall paused and looked at them.

"You have a hard collar on," he said.

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"Take it off."

"Take—what for?"

"This building is the last word—*my* last word—in acoustics. I can't have anything spoiling it." He looked at Gretel. She was standing there, uncomplaining as ever. "Tell her to take off those stockings, too. They're sheet plastic, and might echo."

Wylie glanced over his shoulder at the speck that was the retreating heliplane, shrugged, and took off his collar. "Take your stockings off," he said to Gretel.

THE spasm that signified mental activity crossed Gretel's bland face. "He's crazy," she said, looking at Drecksall.

"You're kiddin'," said Wylie. "Go on—take 'em off."

Once that was disposed of, Drecksall opened the door and followed them in. He turned on the lights, closed the door. "Sit over there," he said to Wylie, indicating the stone seat under the jutting block. He led Gretel over to the other chair. Then he took his violin out and put the case into a recess in the wall. A panel slid over it.

"This is a looney sort of place," said Wylie. His voice echoed so that it hurt his ears. For his own comfort, he whispered. "What gave you the idea for it?"

Drecksall stopped rubbing his bow with rosin to stare at his manager. 'What gave me the idea? Study, you fool. Years of it. Infinite patience in going into the laws and phenomena and—and tricks of acoustics. Be quiet. I'm going to play."

He snuggled the tail of the violin into the hollow of his throat, bowed the open strings, flattened one of them microscopically. Then, without another word, he began to play.

Little else could be said here than that he played his Largo. It began stridently, weaving that dreadful flaming frame for the vision of Gretel; and Wylie was whisked deep into it. One part of his brain ticked busily away, still wondering about this auditorium, the fact that it was built for an audience of two, the surprise in discovering that for years Drecksall had had a secret activity, the realization that the acoustics of the place were indeed amazing. The notes spread out from his inspired violin, were gathered at the top of the dome and hurled back with a force that made the building tremble. Yes, the building echoed; soon, it had far more echoed sound in it than original, so that Drecksall could slip into a thin, sweet piping and be accompanied by a tumultuous background of sound that he had created long seconds before.

The music suddenly took an ear-shattering turn, and then began a theme—a theme that caught both Wylie and the comatose Gretel the same way, made them both stretch their memories back and back until they settled on a dark lake. They saw again a figure on a rock, pressing notes out through the warm air on a hilltop lake. The same theme—and then again that crashing series of bass runs; and then, before the listeners had time to be startled by it, that almost telepathic theme again. Back and back again he returned to it, the roar of the bass strings and the compelling measures of the memory theme; and always they were faster, and louder, and closer together. They blended finally into a great crescendo, a monster welling of sound that gathered in the dome and came crashing down, pressing the stone block away from the wall, sending its massive tons down on Pascal Wylie. Its crash was symphonic, precisely blended with the mood and rhythm of the music; and as

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the echoes died away, that whole section of floor sank out of sight, bearing Wylie's crushed body and the pile of rubble that hid it; and a panel slid across the opening. Now the auditorium was acoustically perfect for the greater task that was at hand.

GRETEL sat in a paralysis of fear, and Drecksall played earnestly on. This part of the Largo was justice. He had long wanted to kill Wylie because Wylie, he felt, had killed the Gretel he pictured. But artistic integrity forbade the use of any weapon but music, for music was so deeply involved.

And now began the recreation of his old, old vision. He did not look at the unmoving Gretel, but sketched in the essentials of his tone-portrait, and then went over them and over them, filling in. He never lost sight of the shades he had already drawn, but all the while he strove for more and more perfect completion. Even Gretel began to see it. The music moved, with mechanical perfection, across her mental screen, burning indelibly wherever it touched. It moved with speed, slowly, the way the darting photoelectric beam slowly draws a transmitted photograph. It moved as indirectly and as purposefully and as implacably.

The laboring strings hummed and crackled, and Drecksall's fingers were a blur. Gretel, shockingly, felt the fabric of the clothes she had worn that day, all over her body; she felt the warmth of the setting sun on her back, and her lips began to move in the words she had spoken then, so vivid was the music.

And then, shrilly, the thing was complete. The picture was there sustained by one thin, high note that fell and fell until it became low and vibrant and infinitely compelling. It continued unbearably, filling the room, filling it again at twice the pressure, again and again. A trickle of powdered stone came down from the tower's base, and then the tortured stone could stand no more. The upper walls cracked and the tower burst through.

And as it did, Vernon Drecksall saw and claimed his reward. The mass of masonry opened high over his head and a shaft of golden sunlight speared through, and in the roaring, dust-filled auditorium Gretel sat spotlighted. Her pose, her hair, her very expression, were, to his crazed and triumphant mind, the Largo, come alive. With a glad cry he hurled his violin away and caught her in his arms on the very instant that the great tower crushed down on them both. He had his revenge, and he had his consummation.

The chandeliers on the eighty-first floor of the Empire State Building swung wildly without any reason. A company of soldiers marched over a new, well-built bridge, and it collapsed. Enrico Caruso filled his lungs and sang, and the crystal glass before him shattered.

And Vernon Drecksall composed his Largo.

THE END

☆ COMING NEXT MONTH— ☆

THE STRANGE "SECRET OF ELEANA'S TOMB"

By KARL TANZLER VON COSEL

☆ A TRUE STORY! ☆

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Secret of the Yomar

by Elroy Arno

Deep within the Yomar Range lay a great secret, and only Stron, son of Karr, was destined to learn its source

WHERE the high, red hills of the Yomar Range dip down to meet the lush, purple foliage of the canal country, there was sadness, with an undercurrent of excitement among the people. Death was running a foot-race. Karr was dying, and his son had but a few hours to reach the old man's side.

Word had gone out with the runners, and Stron, son of Karr, had been summoned from the dry, dusty valleys of the Yomar Range. By smoke-telegraph, Stron had said that he was coming.

Along the canals, people were already mourning, for Karr said that he would die, and they did not question him. Karr had lived long, but his going would still be a great blow to his beloved friends. Karr lay down in his hut, a low, thatched abode with clean rushes on the floor and the odor of sweet canal grass making his bed a pleasant place to rest.

Karr's great head, half hidden under thick red hair and heavy rust colored beard, rolled slowly from side to side. The village herb-woman was present, but her brews no longer killed the pain that filled Karr's chest. His lips were burned and cracked by fever. His arms, once as strong as steel bars, lay limply at his side.

He tried to speak, but only a choked whisper came from his throat. A willowy, superbly built young girl arose from her place near the wall and ran to his side. She crouched beside him, her pale cheek close to Karr's lips. She listener intently, struggling to understand his words.

"Is it—long—before—Stron . . . ?"

She understood, and smiled at him tenderly, placing a gentle finger on his lips. She shook her head, and crimson hair billowed about her soft neck and shoulders.

"Please be quiet, Father. Stron will come soon. Yomar is a vast place, and even speed and distance cannot conquer it in an hour."

There was pity in her voice. Twin spots of color touched her lips. There was great love in the girl for the old man and for Stron, her brother, who was on his way home.

Karr's head moved again and feverish lips begged for water. She rose and ran from the hut without seeing the people who waited outside the door. When she had her jug full of the fresh sweet water from the canal, and had returned to the hut, Karr was asleep. She placed the jug at his side and returned to her place. She sank down upon the rush floor and her head drooped forward with sheer exhaustion. It was soon dark, and they both slept. The man waiting to die, and the girl to start her

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The tiger-bird swooped down on Stron with its many-taloned legs ripping and tearing at his flesh. Stron waited his time, blade held ready . . .

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adventure of living.

The village herb-woman arose silently, shook her head as though all this had stunned her, and left the hut.

NIGHT had fallen over the sun-parched hills and deep valleys of the Yomar Range. The youth did not falter in his stride. So great an effort had never been asked of Stron before today, and his rippling, brown flesh and mighty muscles cried out in pain against the thing he was doing.

Since morning, he had never stopped running. The pace was swift and his long, piston-like strides made every inch of his body glisten with sweat. Dust covered him until his lungs rebelled at the stuff. He did not try to follow the ridges, although he knew that the valleys might hold death for him. Home was in a straight line, and he went there without avoiding the sharp ledges and pitted, black holes.

The leather "cantung" slung at his side, was half empty of the dust filled, filthy water found near the last hole. In the darkness he could not be sure that the valleys were empty of death. The lights of Phobos and its weaker sister, Deimos, were higher, sending weak beams across the still hills. His feet felt hot in the sand, and he heard the tiny sounds of it as it spurted behind him in billowing clouds. Stron had time to think.

Never had Karr summoned him like this. The herding places of the "sheed" were high in the hills. He had not planned to come back to the lush canals before another season passed. Then came word that Karr's day was close. Karr had often told Stron he had one trust. He must always protect Laura, his sister, and keep her at his side. When Karr died, that would be Stron's only vow.

Then why did Karr call him now? He had come a hundred "milos" since morning. He must travel an equal distance in the night. He did not regret that the runners called him to Karr's side, but he was amazed that Karr asked for him. That was not Karr's way.

Stron hesitated momentarily at the crest of a ridge, tried to pierce the shadows of the valley with his sharp eyes, and could see nothing. His feet carried him down a long, sharp incline into those shadows. He was swallowed up in the blackness. It closed about him like a hideous, crouching beast. He clutched his long, bone handled knife, and it filled him with new, secret power. A contented, determined grin touched his lips and revealed strong, white teeth. Sensing rather than actually seeing the deep pit ahead, he leaped into the air, twice the height of a man and cleared the opposite edge of the pit easily.

He was half way across the valley now, with the smooth, soft surface of the hills just ahead.

"Wheeeeeee."

The weird, screeching call of the 'Darz,' echoed through the valley. Stron's blood ran cold for an instant, and then anger and resentment flooded through his body. The Darz, killer "bird-tiger" of the Yomars, had scented him. He ran onward steadily, staying on that straight line. His knife was gripped in his right hand. It was heavy, and the long, curved blade threw him slightly off balance as he ran.

HE SAW the bird-tiger even before it struck. He saw it in his memory-pictures of past battles. The wide, batlike wings—the gleaming, scaly cat-body. Then came the *swish* of wings, and Stron dropped to his knees. He swung the long blade over his head in a wide sweep. The beating wings passed

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over him. This wasn't the attack. The bird-tiger had meant to throw him to the sand and place him in a position for the strike.

He could not afford to stop. Time was far too precious now. On his feet, Stron dashed forward once more. Atop the sandy ridge in the light of the tiny moons, he heard the Darz come in for the kill. A long, glittering body with four talon-tipped legs, shot downward. Stron sank to his knees.

This time he waited, timing the blow carefully. The body of the Darz covered him like a sinister storm shadow. The lightning thrust of the talons came. Stron crouched low and struck upward with all his strength.

The blade penetrated a spot between the scales and buried itself to the bone hilt. The force of the lunge threw Stron off balance and he rolled in the sand.

The Darz shot straight aloft as though it hardly felt the sting of the blade. It flew faster and faster, up toward the twin moons. Suddenly the beaked mouth opened and a death cry hurtled across the hills and rebounded in a thousand echoes, splitting the silence of the night. Wings flapped emptily against the air. The huge body hurtled downward and flopped on the sand. Stron's aim had been perfect.

He reached the body of the *bird-tiger* and ripped the knife from its body. He pivoted and without great trouble, relocated the direction of his home. He must run even faster, for he had lost time, and Karr could not wait long.

THE canal people knew that Stron, son of Karr, had come home. The watchers in the foothills had signaled with the smoke-beacons that Stron was near. He would reach the village soon. Dawn came like a red blaze that burned over the land, and friends of Karr gathered to see Stron's coming.

In twenty seasons, Stron had proven his strength and prowess. He was in every sense, a man, and a son of whom Karr could be proud. The story of Stron's journey had come before him, by the tales told by the smoke-beacons.

The story told much of Stron's courage.

"He has traveled two hundred *milos,*" the smoke-beacons whispered softly into the sky. "Without effort, he slaughtered one of the mighty *bird-tigers.*"

"His lungs have been as strong as leather, his muscles like iron. He has run swiftly, and in a straight line, and his feet carry him as though on wings, straight down from the Yomar Range."

With the coming of Stron, the girl who sat in the hut, washed and carefully combed her long hair, until it gleamed in the sun, outdoing the color of the splendid copper ball in the sky.

She made Karr as comfortable as she could.

Stron had only kind words for his friends, and when they had told him how loyal he had been to come, he entered the hut and went to his father. He smiled at Laura, and patted her soft curls. There was no fear in his eyes, and she found in his presence greater comfort than she had felt in her eighteen years. She was proud of the man, and of the heaving chest and the dust and perspiration that covered his tired body.

Karr's eyes opened, and in spite of the haze of pain that filmed them, he smiled with a fierce pride for his son. He lifted one hand with great effort and put his arm about Stron's shoulders.

"You—have come far," he said. "I heard reports of your journey. I am glad that my son knows his duty."

Stron tried not to betray the pity he felt for the huge man on the reed bed.

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He saw the hollow cheeks and the paleness that crept through the once deeply burned skin. He could feel the weakness of the arm that held him at Karr's side.

"I came as fast as I could, father," he said.

They remained silent for a while, seeing only admiration in each other's eyes. Then the old man shuddered. His eyes were suddenly afraid.

"There is little time," he said. "I have battled the Gods of darkness, to remain here until you came. Now we are together, they call me strongly. I have something to say. *Something I hoped in my heart that I would never have to say.*"

"I am listening, father."

Karr's arm slipped from the boy's shoulder and fell at his side.

"Listen carefully," he begged. "Your sister will listen also, for the two of you will carry out my request."

The girl came and stood by their side. Her shoulders were held high with pride. Her eyes, cool and softly brown, were moist.

"I am here, Father," she whispered.

"I will die today," Karr said. His voice grew stronger with the will to speak. "When I am gone, you will leave me in the hills. The Darz will come for my useless corpse."

The boy nodded.

"As you will it."

Karr nodded.

"You and Laura will leave the canals," Karr said. "You will journey to the city of Novark."

Stron's breath sucked in sharply, and Laura's face went white.

KARR'S heart was pounding so fiercely that they could watch the chest above it flutter in its last terrific battle. His voice sank to a whisper.

"I cannot tell—I have no time to tell you what you must know. At Novark, you will search for a man called Fanton. He was the Court Physician at the Palace of Nova. He is in hiding. Ask for him among the lower people on the streets."

"It is a long, terrible journey," Stron said softly. "I could go alone, but—Laura . . .?"

"Silence."

A semblance of power came into Karr's voice. "Remember that you are a faithful son, and I am still your elder. You will not question me. You will both do as I direct. See the man, Fanton. He will make all things clear to you."

"You are tired, Father," Stron said gently. "Remember that I have never seen this Fanton. Laura would suffer in the hills of the Yomar Range. It would be . . ."

"Enough!"

Karr struggled up slowly, his elbows carrying the weight of his body.

"I will not listen. Where Laura goes, you go. She must never be left alone. You and the girl are one, always. You are charged with her safety."

Stron nodded helplessly. His mind was cluttered with bewildering questions that he knew he must not ask. If the city of Novark could bring only torture and death, then it was Karr's wish that they die together.

"We will go to Novark—together," he said softly. "Now—rest, Father. You cannot die. Your strength will not fail you."

A smile touched Karr's lips. He seemed content. He sank down again, licking his dried lips with parched tongue.

The girl remained motionless. She could not understand that a giant like Karr, could die like a helpless child. Yet, she wasn't able to prevent his going. If Stron experienced any fear, he

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did not betray his emotions.

"You feel better now, father?" he asked after a time.

Karr ignored his question.

"I have trained you to outwit and outrun every beast, whether man or animal, in the Yomar Range," he said. "I do not doubt your ability to face any odds."

Stron knew that his Father was evading the question.

"I am but a child as compared to Karr, the giant of the canal people," he said simply.

Karr's eyes were filled with dream-stuff. Tears welled up and blinded his once clear eyes.

"Once I *was* a mighty warrior," he said dreamily. "You are better than I. Remember, when you are afraid, I have taught you to *ignore* fear."

His voice faltered and he knew that Stron had got to his feet and was bending over him, rubbing his chest. Stron's fingers were strong and supple, and his warm hand felt good against the aching, pounding flesh. He made an effort to speak.

"I—will always—be—proud . . ."

The heart forgot to beat, and the blinding pain covered Karr with perspiration. He stiffened and cried out:

"Carry me to the Darz."

Those words were choked and wasted, for although they formed in his throat, there was no life to carry them beyond his lips.

STRON arose slowly and went to the door. He stared across the lush plains and beyond the wide, blue canals. He rubbed his bare arm across his eyes, for they were blinded.

He re-entered the room and picked his father up in his arms. Laura sank back in the corner and buried her face in her hands. She made no sound. Without faltering, Stron carried his father's body from the village and into the foothills beyond. In the valley of death, he placed the corpse tenderly upon a giant, sun-warmed slab of stone. Without looking back, he strode homeward.

Tonight, he thought, the great Darz will sweep down and carry the shell of Karr away to the hills of the Yomars. It was the custom, this consigning of the body to those monsters. It was Karr's last request. Without soul, or beating heart, Karr wanted his shell cast away as a useless thing, to be quickly forgotten.

* * *

The crimson, thirsting sun shot down with slanting rays against black, blittering shoulders. It sought every bit of moisture to quell the horrible thirst of the red-hot ball. Here, one the very edge of the city or Novark, the sun seemed even angrier, for at the bottom of the ebony rock ridge, where the blue canals fed life to the city, the sun could not do harm. The sun gave up its battle where the cold, sweet water ran, and man took his place.

Once Mars had been a wild, untamed hell of heat and thirst. It was dominated by the sun. Then the Sacred Nova came. Nova, first king of Mars, who came from a far-off place and with infinite patience and skill, started to construct the canals and build the irrigation system.

From the polar caps, water thawed and flowed down the vast network of man-made rivers. The canals, built by the Martians under the leadership of Nova, sucked greedily of the new-found water and nursed the sick land back to life.

The Sacred King of Nova never betrayed his origin. Perhaps he was an Engineer, come from Earth with a dream. There were records, long lost and existing only in legend, of a Nova

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who came in a strange, fire-propelled ship and landed on the parched desert. Of a Nova who talked with the people and showed them how he could make them strong and happy. There are legends which tell of tons of red earth tossed away and of long, wide canals of pure, snow melted water that brought back health and put Nova above all the Gods who ever lived.

The Sacred Nova was long since gone, but his family still existed, and his entire line was worshipped as Gods are worshipped. The fairest maidens of Mars went into wedlock with the Gods who sprang from Nova's family, and the city of Novark came into being. One great city, the center of Martian strength and life.

* * *

Sad days came to Mars. At last there was a Nova who betrayed his own people.

The name was still worshipped in the land, but the man, Nova XX, brought a new meaning to the name. He brought fear and terror to all but a few who fawned at his feet. A great pall fell like a cloud over the sacred family.

This was Nova XX and the city he ruled, Novark.

THE trip through the Yomar Range had been a terrible experience, and only raw strength and courage had brought Stron and his sister through alive. Without the girl, Stron would have made the journey with less hardship. She forced him to travel slowly, for she could not stand the long marches. The sun, isolating these two humans, and trying to beat them down to the red earth, had not succeeded. They sat on the ridge above Novark and stared down at the towers and streets of the city.

Stron touched his sister's hand gently, for they had grown very close to each other, and strange sensations gripped at their hearts. Stron looked at his sister with a curious feeling of mixed love and admiration. He felt disgust at himself, for he tingled at her very touch. It should not be so, but he could not master the feeling of affection he felt toward the slim, bronzed girl. He wondered at the blush that turned her cheeks softly pink.

She sighed.

"It has been a hard journey," she said.

He nodded, drawing his hand away.

"The worst of it lies ahead," he said. "I cannot understand why our father sent us here. Why should we leave the peaceful land for this . . ."

He waved his hand in a sweeping motion, indicating his hatred for the richly endowed city and its hated ruler.

"Once it was a good place," the girl said. "The Sacred Nova I, was a great ruler. We cannot forget our debt to the family."

Stron scowled. "Now it is a city of misery and hate," he said scornfully. "It is a city of lust and slavery. Even the sight of it sickens me."

Laura was not a child. She had heard often of the slave-marts that dealt in soft flesh and caressing beauty. Girls of her village had been stolen for the King's harem.

She stared straight ahead of her, down at the city.

"It will be a strong slaver who sells my body to a harem," she said coolly. "I would not submit to . . ."

"My sister," Stron interrupted harshly.

She gave him an amazed glance. "I am not a baby, that I do not know of such things. "You need not worry about me. I will fight at your side, as a man would fight."

Then she was acutely aware of her tattered clothing and the soft expanse

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of firm flesh visible along her thigh. Quickly she drew the dress about her, and again Stron swore under his breath because of his longings. Shame filled him, and he arose quickly.

"We will enter Novark after dark," he said roughly. "I do not know how to find Fanton. I heard from the agents who stole from our village that in Novark there is an underground where men gather who fight against Nova XX. If Fanton is among the common people, then he will be best found in the underground, for the commoners dare not be seen in the streets. We will search for them at night."

The girl nodded, grateful for the change of conversation. She studied the lovely towers and spires of Novark, bathed in rainbow colors by a retreating sun.

"Stron," she said with wonder in her voice," why has Karr sent us here?"

He shook his head.

"My head throbs with pain over the problem," he admitted. "Karr has never been to Novark himself. His friends told me that. His only contact has been with the agents of Nova XX. Yet, he seems to know this man Fanton, and thinks we must go to him."

"It was Karr's wish," the girl said simply.

"And that was enough," Stron admitted. "I would be a thousand times worse than a coward to betray my father."

They said no more. The sun gave up its last grip upon that side of the planet. When it came again to Novark, these two bits of humanity would be out of its grasp. Then, perhaps, they would be fighting against an even more horrible enemy. . . .

NOVARK was a strange, colorful place after darkness fell. In the glow of many-colored lights, it came alive with garish of the canal people, the slave traders, mysterious, veiled women and the splendid uniforms of the Palace Honor Guards.

The women moved softly, quietly, through the streets, all escorted by harem masters or their own men. Night brought them into the streets, seeking the only fresh air and exercise they were allowed. The watchful eyes of the slave traders missed no shapely hip or shining, eager eye.

Into this moving tide of humanity, Stron led his sister. He had placed his cloak about her shoulders to hide the smoothness of her step, but the honest, eye-arresting face had no veil to protect it. She felt a strange excitement in seeing for the first time the city that her friends had labelled with so many frightening titles.

They moved with the crowd, and were caught up by the spirit of the place. There was a soft, glowing beauty in the buildings of Novark that hid for a time the slime and filth locked in the thoughts of the men who walked in the streets. This was not Mars. It was the dirty hole in which the parasites gathered. It was the hiding place of the thief and the harlot who lived on the clean flesh of an innocent and hopeless, helpless people.

Hunger came first into Stron's stomach, and he knew that they had not eaten for hours. They must find a place to sit and partake of food that would give them the needed strength to go on. With his arm tightly about the girl, he pushed his way out of the swirling crowd and found a shop where the sign of the roasting *sheed* was displayed above the open door. Odors of cooking flesh mingled with the perfume and stink of the street. Stron drew Laura after him into a doorway. He stopped short, confronted by two tall, strongly built men dressed in the blue and gold

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uniforms of the palace Honor Guard.

He stood quite still waiting for them to step aside, and knew that their eyes and their voices were suddenly excited and made alert by Lapra's presence. His fingers sought the handle of his knife, hidden under the wide belt.

Before he could detain them, the first guard stepped past him and put his hand on the soft roundness that Laura's cloak could not hide.

The girl's hand shot out, hitting his cheek a resounding blow. The guard, taken aback by the sudden fury of the girl, forgot his goal and swore at her. His companion laughed.

Stron's blood was sudden, seething fire. As automatically as he would have saved himself from the death plunge of the Darz, he whipped out the long blade in his belt and buried it to the hilt in the Honor Guard's stomach.

The man stood there, clutching at the handle of the knife, his face colorless with sudden horror. He struggled, trying to draw the knife free, and went to his knees. No one moved as he sank on his side, blood gurgling from his partly open mouth.

His companion sprang forward. At the same time, he shouted loudly.

"Hurry the Guards of Nova! Murder has been done!"

His voice carried above the sounds of the street and a hushed silence fell over all within hearing. Stron, calculating every move, sank to his knees and twisted the knife free. He sent the second guard backward with a blow from the hilt of the knife. Then the silence was lost and a howling, roaring flood of humans were twisting and flowing like angry water through the streets. A trumpet sounded not far away, and the sound of hurried commands came clearly above the general noise.

"Quickly," Stron urged the girl. "There are too many."

He grasped her wrist and pulled her into the street. The crowd parted from them as though they were marked by the hand of death. But there was nowhere to run, and they were hemmed in by a circle of wild eyed people.

A path opened in the mob and a squad of blue and gold guards rushed toward them. A huge, black-bearded guard led them, his electro-sword unsheathed, his eyes cold as ice-diamonds.

"Where is the one who dares murder a guard?" he shouted.

STRON, standing alone with the girl, pushed her gently behind him. She stood there, her hand gripped in his with the strength of steel. She watched him with the love and faith that she had grown to feel under every moment of fear.

A voice came from the mob.

"There he is. Be careful of the slave. He carries a knife!"

Then fingers were pointing and Stron knew that he would fight—and probably die. He would never run.

The man with the black beard closed in slowly, the electro-sword thrust before him. His face mirrored certain respect for the man he was facing. Stron saw something in that face that surprised him. The pleasure of a battle, and more. He saw the honest grin and gentlemanly respect for an antagonist who was his equal.

The guard moved slowly, shifting and feinting. He saw the long bladed knife appear as though by magic in Stron's hand.

His eyes widened momentarily, and he dashed at the boy. Stron pushed Laura away from him in one motion and ducked swiftly to one side. Strange memories flashed swiftly into Stron's mind. Memories of words spoken once by Karr's lips.

"Some day you will be forced to bat-

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tle with the King's agents. Remember that the *lightning sword* is death in their hands. Evade the tip of that hellish weapon."

Even now, a violent shower of sparks fell over his head, shooting from the electro-sword brandished in black-beard's hand. Stron rolled over swiftly and came to his feet with the speed of a fanged cat. He twisted around like a dervish and slashed the cord that held black-beard's cloak at the neck. The rich cape fell to the street.

Black-beard caught his balance and pivoted, the grin gone, his teeth pressed tightly together and visible between slightly parted lips.

The man was no fool. He danced about lightly, a half dozen steps that took him well away from the knife blade. He saw Stron's gleaming skin, and admired the muscles that worked like well oiled leather under that flesh.

"So," he spoke with some effort, "you wish to play?"

Stron grinned in spite of himself. There were huge odds against him, but the blood of Karr had become almost his blood. *Don't let the tip of the lightning sword touch you,* his mind repeated over and over.

Black-beard came in again, slowly, yet with his body ready, his eyes alert. Always, when the rush came, Stron was out of his way. The flesh on the guard's forearm was flecked with blood droplets where the blade had touched. The wound lost him his temper and the battle.

"An end to this," he shouted, and rushed the man with the knife. An angry shower of sparks shot toward Stron. He waited for the final thrust as easily as he had so often waited for the last blow of the bird-tigers.

HE SAW the sparks come straight at him, and dropped to his knees. The sword was above him. He shot upward so swiftly that black-beard could not escape the blow. His sword met the full impact of steel, and went twisting through the air. Stron was in front of him, his left arm locked about his waist, the knife blade pricking his chest through the gold-braided uniform. Cold fear dilated his eyes and opened his lips in a short outcry.

"Now," Stron whispered through set teeth. "Are you ready to feel the blade?"

The men about them were hypnotized by what had happened. No one had the power to cry out or to attack.

There is horror in death faced at close quarters. Horror that the strongest of men cower away from when it leaps.

"No—no!" The black bearded guard stopped struggling and stood very still. His hands dropped at his sides. "You are the better man. I deserve death, but I would be a fool to welcome it. Release me, and I will promise you fair treatment."

The fear was gone, for that moment when black-beard had lost control, had passed. They had reached an impasse. Stron could not kill, for there was something about black-beard that was different. He had good qualities that Stron recognized even beneath a hated uniform. He hesitated. Alone, he might kill again and escape. With Laura to depend on him, he could only expect death for himself and torture and shame for his sister. He looked at her, and saw terror in her eyes. Perhaps he could save her.

"You promise by the Sacred Nova that I will not be punished?"

Black-beard nodded.

"By the Sacred promise of Nova," he panted.

There was new horror in the man's face now. Horror in the realization

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that he had dared promise in the name of the King. But there was the knife to be taken into consideration, and the threat there was real.

Black-beard was suddenly ashamed of himself, for showing such weakness in the face of death. His eyes fell and he stared at the pavement. Stron knew that the promise had been given in good faith, and he released his prisoner.

THE two stood opposite each other within the circle of men. The guards moved in slowly, awe in their expressions, not knowing just what the next move would be. They looked to black-beard for their orders. Hands were poised on weapons.

Black-beard was suddenly himself again. He picked up his sword and thrust it into the scabbard. He turned and roared at his men.

"Fall in." He sounded very grim. "You have seen a better man than yourselves tonight. You heard me promise safety to him, for sparing my life. It happens that, although I may be a coward, I am man enough to realize that I am worth more to myself alive—than I would have been dead. Remember what I promised and if you touch him, you'll answer to Draco."

He turned on Stron.

"You are under my protection," he said, and then noticing Laura at Stron's side, "if one of my men insults the girl, I'll have my sword into him faster than you knifed that ungrateful swine in the door of the food house."

The guard who had felt the sting of Stron's fist, started to protest.

"He is a murderer. He must go before the King."

Draco, the black-beard, swung on the speaker and the man cowered back.

"Then he goes before the King," he snapped. "But, I go with him. I, Draco, will speak for him. No man who fights so cunningly, and yet has room for mercy in his soul, can fail to impress the Sacred King."

Somewhere, a guard chuckled. Another shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

With Stron close to her, his arm about her waist, Laura waited for them to form ranks and march on either side. Her head was held high now, for she knew that Stron would always keep his promise to protect her. If these men knew they were taking to King Nova XX, a rich, perhaps the richest of all, harem prizes, they did not betray themselves by so much as a glance at the girl. Stron was there, with the knife that struck faster than an electro-sword. That was enough to keep them marching with eyes straight ahead.

THE great room was so vast that it carried echoing voices among the pillars hundreds of times, until they were lost in the dimness. There were a thousand pillars in the great throne room, each of them a glittering golden symbol of Nova's power.

Nova XX, King of Mars, was seated on the marble throne in the direct center of the vast place. No one stood near him. He was alone, his thin, healthy face brooding, jet-black eyes narrowed in thought. He waited while the detachment of guards marched smartly the length of the room and paused before him. Nova XX had his left arm poised on the edge of the massive throne, his right elbow crooked so that the palm of his hand rested under the sharp chin. He did not move.

Draco stepped smartly forward and saluted. Behind Draco, Stron and the girl stood alone. King Nova XX glanced at the girl and for a brief instant his eyes betrayed interest. Then his attention was for Draco alone.

"I hear that you have embroiled

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yourself in a bloody feud with a slave," he said coldly.

Draco said:

"Bad news travels on wings, Your Sacred Majesty."

There was, perhaps, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. Say what you will, Stron thought, this Draco is a fighter, and no coward.

"And are you in trouble, also, Queen of Beauty?"

The King was addressing Laura. Her eyes did not evade his steady look. She only held Stron's arm more tightly.

"I am no queen," she said in a steady voice. "My brother speaks for me. I am a peasant girl who would not dare speak at length to so high a personage."

Nova frowned. It was evident that he did not enjoy her rebuff, but that he was fascinated by her spirited reply. He looked at the youth at the girl's side. He saw only another slave, run amok.

"Speak, *brother,*" he said angrily. "I have little time for you. Tonight you murdered one of my Royal Guards. You know the punishment?"

Stron met his stormy gaze and did not flinch.

"The man insulted my sister and laid hands upon her. I would kill any man who did as much."

The King's eyebrows lifted.

"Draco, is this true?" he asked.

Draco moved forward two paces and spoke fervently.

"Your Sacred Majesty," he said, "it is. I challenged the boy with my weapon and he out-fought me. He would be a valuable and honest addition to the Guards. He comes from brave stock."

King Nova XX stood up slowly. His eyes were glowing like living fire.

"You also promised the boy freedom —in my name?"

"I did," Draco said. "I thought that . . ."

The King's fist came down with a thud against the arm of the throne.

"You aren't allowed to think for me, Captain Draco," he roared.

"I have won the highest title in the Honor Guards," Draco said, his face turning pale. "I deserve some consideration."

The King spat full in his face. He stood there, his arms folding slowly across his chest.

"That, *Captain* Draco, is the consideration you have earned from me."

Draco's face betrayed nothing. His eyes burned. His mouth was suddenly a straight, white gash of shocked anger.

"I believe, your *Sacred* Majesty," Draco said with words that burned with fury, "that your method of repaying your loyal servants, clearly indicates the correct station of your life. Even a King can be a low-born fool."

Nova XX seemed about to lose his temper. Instead, he spoke softly, with the velvet of smooth steel in his voice.

"Brave man, Draco, to face death from me without flinching, and yet cower at the feet of a slave who holds a knife."

Draco had gone beyond reasoning.

"I face a coward and why should I fear him? Tonight I faced a brave man, and had a right to fear such bravery."

Nova XX turned his back on them. He walked toward the throne, his shoulders thrown back, hands balled into fists at his side.

"Take them to the cells," he shouted. "Wait—leave the woman here."

A guard grasped Laura's wrist and pulled her away from Stron. When the girl left his side, a hell-fire of hatred burst inside the boy's head. Like a crazy man he jerked the knife from his belt and sprang. He heard Draco call to him, but the black-beard's cry was unheeded. Laura sobbed and fell away from the guard as Stron landed on the

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man's shoulders. The Guard screamed, once . . .

The knife flashed and the guard no longer cried. His head rolled on the floor in a bath of blood.

Stron pivoted, facing the King.

"Burn him down," Nova XX shouted. "Burn him without mercy."

Stron heard the voice, and focused his attention upon the thing. He rushed toward the narrow-faced man who stood near the throne. He took two steps and felt something hit him between the shoulders. It was the shocking blow of the electro-swords. He seemed to twist suddenly half around and darkness rushed at him. He tried to hold his hands before the thing that sought to destroy him, but he could not hold back the fire that showered in his face. Then he knew no more.

STRON was amazed that he was still alive. He sat up slowly, his head still spinning. He looked around him. He was in a tiny, metal-walled cell. The cubicle was no more than six-feet square, without openings visible to the eye. He tried to force himself erect, but the pain was so great that he fell back, the hard surface offering no protection to his aching body.

He turned his head and stared at the fuzzy vision of a man who stood near him.

"Draco," he said slowly, wonderingly.

"I'm here," the voice said.

His vision cleared slowly. Draco was stripped to the waist. His chest was criss-crossed with deep, blood clotted wounds. His face was bruised and the skin had been broken in a dozen places. His eyes, filled with pain, were still burning with anger.

Stron tried to smile.

"We are both alive," he said. "In life there is some comfort."

Draco regarded him steadily.

"I betrayed you," he said. "I am a coward, and a fool as well. You will always bear me a grudge."

Stron shook his head.

"You were bewildered, but not really frightened of me," he said slowly, as though thinking the whole thing out carefully as he talked. "No coward could face the King and speak as you spoke. We both have made mistakes. We are friends."

Draco moved to the hard bunk and took Stron's hand in his. He gripped it without speaking. There was warmth and new strength in their hand-clasp.

Stron suddenly felt better. Then he remembered the King's chamber and Laura. He sprang to his feet, felt the old pain return and sank down, his hands over his face.

"My sister? I am so weak that I cannot even protect myself. What has happened to her?"

Draco put his hands on Stron's shoulders. He gripped them tightly.

"You must be calm. The girl is safe for a time. I will try to tell you what happened."

Stron listened for there was no choice. He could not escape this metal coffin of a cell.

"You should be dead," Draco said. "Nova ordered your death. Then when they had dropped you with their electro-swords, and you did not die, he changed his mind. Nova XX is a sadist of the lowest kind. He ordered that you would remain alive, only to suffer by a more fitting method of torture when you are able to stand.

"We were dragged from the chamber. I was whipped and pounded until I could no longer cry out. I only awakened a short time ago. You have been paralyzed for two suns."

He wet his lips and released his grip on Stron's shoulders.

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"We will be thrown into the arena as soon as they see us both on our feet again."

"Laura," Stron said softly. "What of her?"

Draco knew the answer without having witnessed what happened. He had often watched Nova XX's harem girls dragged away to bondage. His eyes had not been wasted on Laura's youthful loveliness.

"She was taken to the slave quarters," he said. "She will be dressed, and prepared for the harem. They will tell her what can be said in the King's presence. It will take a week for them to administer small doses of drug, so that she will do the King's bidding, and yet not lose the essential strength and clarity of mind to entertain the King in a fitting manner."

Stron stared up at the guard with pleading, hopeless eyes.

"I must reach her."

Draco swore softly.

"For myself, I would ask nothing more than to rescue your sister and run a knife into Nova XX's ugly belly, in the same hour. We are not the ones to choose. The arena is our last battle, unless miracles are showered upon us. The bird-tigers will tear us apart like silken cushions."

FROM Stron's eyes shot a last hopeful gleam. He grasped Draco's arm, gripped it tightly.

"We—fight against the Darz?"

Draco looked bewildered.

"But of course. Nova XX's greatest sport is to watch the bird-tigers make bloody meat of his slaves."

Suddenly Stron laughed aloud. A great, impossible burden was cast from his mind.

"Then I *do* see opportunity to escape, and perhaps save Laura before it is too late."

Draco seemed stunned. Never had he heard a man laugh bitterly—or even laugh at all, because he was to be murdered by the talons of the Darz.

"You hope to conquer the Darz?"

"I do," Stron said confidently. "If we can escape this arena alive, can you take me to Laura?"

Draco nodded, only half hearing the boy's crazy words.

"The tiger-birds have never been killed. Their legs are like sword pointed steel. There isn't a spot on their body where a weapon can penetrate."

Stron smiled.

"Listen to me," he said. "I have killed the tiger-birds many times. Karr taught me. . . ."

"Karr?"

Draco's voice was filled with great respect.

Stron nodded.

"*You* were taught by Karr, the giant of the canals?"

Stron said:

"Laura and I are the children of Karr."

Draco gained sudden courage.

"I knew him well. All fighting men knew him. Never was there a more powerful enemy or more steadfast friend. I believe now that you can battle the Darz. I wish that I could say as much of myself."

"I will teach you," Stron said simply. "The skill remains in your own doing."

Draco nodded eagerly. His eyes were full of the old gleam once more.

"I ask only for knowledge," he said. "If I die, I die by the use of a clumsy hand."

They sat for a long time in the metal cell, and Stron told how the attack would be made and how it could be repulsed. As he spoke, his blood grew hot again. They prepared themselves as best they could, for the battle that would come soon.

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THE arena was a huge, circular pit, sunk twenty feet below the level of the first spectator benches. A wall protected the people who sat, row upon row, where they commanded a good view of what took place in the sand-floored pit.

Only men of Novark were here, for the women could not take part in public gatherings. Merchants, slavers and personal friends of King Nova XX were present to watch two interesting, if doomed, men take part in a one-sided battle with death. They had heard much of the man, Stron, who had attacked and killed two of the King's Guards, and conquered another. Draco's story had traveled far. His words of anger, spoken to the King, had been his death warrant. Men wondered if his courage would fail.

Nova himself, sat alone high in the upper levels of the arena. A great, colorful cloth was stretched taut over his head to protect his face from the sun. Two harem women, the only females allowed here, were reclining on his couch, entertaining him as he wished.

At present, Nova XX watched the two killer bird-tigers chained below him on the sands of the pit. These were the ugliest Darz that could be found in the Yomars. They had fifteen yards of chain, which allowed them the opportunity to lift their great bodies a short distance into the air and fall on their prey. They could not reach the spectators benches, for the chains prevented it.

At high noon, Nova XX glanced impatiently at the hot sun and lifted his right arm. At once, the trumpet of the Honor Guard sounded, and the men who had come to watch death strike, seemed to come out of the stupor they had been in, and take notice of what was taking place below them.

Stron and Draco, each armed with slim, shining daggers and dressed only in breech-cloths, were pushed roughly into the pit. Behind them, advancing steadily, were six guards, their electro-swords prodding the prisoners forward. Draco drew cat-calls from the crowd. A few were hushed, wondering.

He moved forward, head held high, no shame in his eyes. Draco had made many mistakes. At last he had found a true leader and friend in Stron, and his path was clear. Stron, his eyes watching the lazy bird-tigers who rested on the sand of the pit, followed Draco without hesitating. The guards withdrew. The huge gate to the pit closed with a clang. A deathly, fetid silence hung over everything.

Suddenly one of the taloned killers seemed to come to life. Its scabby wings fought the stale air of the pit and the Darz took to the air. Four long, scaly legs, tipped with needle-sharp talons, hung like swords of doom over the arena. The Darz reached the end of its chain, stared down at Draco with beady eyes, and dropped toward him like a dead weight.

A gasp came from the crowd. Draco dropped to his knees and twisted his knife above his head. The sigh of horror ended in cries of amazement. Draco had learned his lesson well. The bird-tiger fought true to form. Having forced Draco to his knees, the bird flew upward again.

Draco's eyes were narrowed. His breath came hard. His gaze never left the bird. The Darz shot down, and the knife sought the vital spot and sank into the bird-tiger's body. A cry of pain came from the bird's beak. It flopped on the sand, blood running from the knife wound.

Draco sprang to his feet and retrieved the weapon. A shout of approval came from the crowd. Meanwhile, Stron was watching the second

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bird. When the other Darz moved, it did not catch Stron unprepared.

With incredible speed, the beast was in the air, and pouncing on Draco's shoulders. Before the talons sank into Draco's flesh, Stron was shouting his warning, and pouncing on the Darz' back.

Draco rolled out of the way just in time, Stron, not so fortunate, knew that he had no chance for the present, to sink the knife into the beast's vital flesh. The Darz tried to twist itself free from the unwelcome burden astride it. It launched itself into the air. Stron held on tightly. Balancing himself with all the skill he possessed, Stron managed to stick on the strange saddle. Never before had the people of Novark seen such a performance. The Darz reached the end of the chain and plummeted back to earth.

The instant the talons touched the sand, Stron was on his feet. The wicked Darz beak twisted and shot at his face. Stron fell to his knees, and sent the knife home.

It was over so quickly that the crowd hardly knew what had happened. Then, with the two ugly bird-tigers lying on the bloody sand, and with both men standing before them, alive, the mob went wild.

Draco turned to Stron and said:

"You saved my life, but I didn't think you would save your own."

Stron grinned weakly.

"Nor I," he admitted. "I've never ridden the Darz before. It wasn't a pleasant pastime."

THE sounds in the arena died slowly. No man had ever fought and killed the Darz before, not in the King's arena. Each man watched and wondered, turning their eyes on King Nova XX. The two in the arena deserved freedom for what they had done.

Nova XX's thin face was furious. He had been tricked. A voice, coming from high above the arena wall, cried out:

"Will torture be the reward for heroes, King Nova?"

Nova XX refused to acknowledge the cry. There was no one here who wished death for these men, but Nova XX himself.

He arose and without a sign, left the throne and disappeared into the corridors beyond. The same voice cried out again:

"Does Nova *fear* to release these two?"

A mob must have only a leader. There was a tremendous howl of protest. The men who sat above the arena were talking among themselves, and moving into small, angry groups.

There came the sharp explosion of an electro-sword. The sounds faded. Stron turned and saw a detachment of Honor Guards, fanned out across the arena floor, walking toward Draco and himself. Their swords were unsheathed. Lightning flashed from the tips.

"There is Nova's answer," Draco said bitterly.

It was true. Nova XX did not use words. He used force. They stood side by side, the winners over death who drew death as their reward. The leader of the group of guards was the man Stron had struck in the street. His lips were white and drawn into a thin sneer across flashing teeth.

A roar of anger came from the seats.

The Guards came on, forming a circle, cutting off retreat. The leader's sword was pointed straight at Stron. An angry shower of sparks fell from the steel tip.

Suddenly, as though staying the hand of death, a powerful beam of fire sprang out of the benches down near the arena wall. The guard crumpled and fell, the sword sticking hilt up at his side, the

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lightning grounded in bloody sand.

The others fell back in confusion. The leader did not move again. Then Stron heard the voice again—the voice that had heckled Nova XX.

"These two will go free. Stay clear of them. The guard who goes close will pay as the first one paid."

The two men stood motionless, unable to believe that they were being spared.

"Come this way, Draco," the voice shouted. "Bring your friend with you."

Neither of them questioned the voice that came from somewhere among the men close to the wall. They ran to the wall, to be lifted up and helped over by willing hands.

There must have been twenty men about them, Stron thought. No one seemed anxious to interrupt the rescue. Not a voice was raised against what took place.

For the first time, Nova XX had been beaten at his own game, and no one but the King himself, seemed unhappy about it.

"MY NAME is Fanton," the slightly built, gray haired man said. He sat on the rough stone bench, his shoulders resting against the stone wall behind him. Here, hidden safely in the tunnels beneath the city of Novark, he could speak safely. Though the man was old and slight of build, steel gray eyes and a vibrant voice, gave him certain power. He looked the two newcomers over carefully.

"For the first time I have fought in public against the King. There are bloody days ahead for us all, now that the challenge has been made."

Stron, standing with Draco at his side, looked at the man with amazement.

"I have come a long way to find you, and instead, it was you who found me," he said.

The cave-room was small. A dozen of Fanton's followers had crowded into it. They wore the garb of the peasant people. Both Fanton and his men stared with interest at the youth who had spoken.

"I have heard about you from my men," Fanton said. "I am surprised to find that you were searching for me. You are from the canal country?"

Stron nodded. He hoped that he could speak freely here. Draco, who had been a King's Guard, might be friend or prisoner here. Yet, Draco was greatly impressed.

"I offer humble thanks to you, Fanton," Draco said quietly. "I have often fought against you. I don't deserve your help."

Fanton's eyes were suddenly mild. He smiled.

"When a man sees the folly of his ways, why shouldn't he be treated justly. I know how you dared to speak to the King. I know that you have always fought against us, but you have fought fairly. I welcome your coming, because you will be able to greatly assist our cause."

Men closed in about them. Fanton leaned close and, with his chin resting on a brown, wrinkled palm, spoke in a gentle voice.

"As long as Nova XX rules, honest people will fight to bring peace back to the planet. If we are fortunate . . .?"

He shrugged and turned to Stron.

"You say you wanted to find me? Where did you come from?"

Stron said:

"I came with my sister, from the canal country. My father was Karr. When he died, he made me promise to search for Fanton. I did not know where to look for you."

Fanton's eyes were suddenly wide open. He stared up at Stron, then to

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the floor, and after some hesitation, back at Stron again. His face was pale.

His voice came with effort.

"*Karr* sent you to me?"

Stron nodded. The men were watching Fanton intently.

"What is your name, boy?"

"Stron."

"Your sister's?"

"Laura," Stron said. "She has been captured by Nova XX. Will you help me save her? I ask for no other help than a guide to show me where she may be hidden."

Fanton seemed not to hear this. He was lost in deep thought.

"How long has Karr been dead?"

Stron tried to forget Laura and concentrate on the man before him.

"Only a few suns," he said. "Karr made me promise to come to Novark. I don't know why."

They were silent. Water dripped down the dark, granite walls and splashed into puddles across the floor. Fanton sank back, eyes partly closed, watching Stron's face.

"I—don't know," he said softly. "It would mean death if we failed. I never expected to have to do this. Perhaps it is right. Karr was a brilliant man."

No man present understood him. Fanton was dreaming aloud. Yet, the very tone of his voice indicated impressive things.

"Karr must have made a great decision to send you to me," he said at last.

FANTON stood up, his arms at his sides. Suddenly his eyes were bright and snapping. His sentences came, short and clipped.

"The time has come," he said. "Karr knew it must. I know that it must. There are many friends hidden in the tunnels. They all fight against Nova XX. Yet, as many as we are, one electro-cannon is our only weapon. You see how little chance we have against the King?"

He started to walk, slowly, from one side of the cave to the other. His chin was firm and held high. Fanton had made up his mind.

"There are many men who will rise to help us when the time comes. I had no wish to use our weapon—the greatest weapon. Karr has said that I should. I could ask for no better adviser."

Every man was listening. Every eye followed him.

"There is an army of ten-thousand guards stationed in Novark. We, the lower class, have only our hatred for a weapon."

He pivoted and faced Stron.

"If I told you that one man could overthrow a Kingdom, would you think I was a fool?"

Stron was impressed with the man, though he seemed to speak madness.

"I, for one, will fight at your side against the King," he said.

"And I," Draco added. "I know the plan of the palace well. I know where the weapons are hidden. I can master most of them."

"Wait," Fanton said. "You are both willing. I do not plan to fight in battle with Nova XX. I have a better plan. I have a weapon that can be used without bloodshed. I alone know how to use it."

Even his own men, regarded Fanton with suspicion. They had never heard him speak riddles, as he was doing now.

"Hear me out," he begged. "Once I was court-physician to the House of Nova. I treated the ills of the Sacred family. I lived with them from boyhood. When Nova XX came to the throne, he was a hateful tyrant. I escaped from him and hid here. I have lived in the caves and sworn that as long as I live, I will wage war against the King."

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He stopped pacing back and forth. The place was still. Far away, hushed voices came from other cell-like caves where groups of peasants talked.

"We have fought a losing battle," he said simply. "I have preserved one last weapon throughout the years. Even now, I dread using it. One slip, and we will all die together. With the help of Karr's advice, and the man, Stron, who was sent here by Karr, we may not fail."

A bearded shepherd stepped forward, arm raised.

"We have never stopped believing in you," he said. "Whatever seems right to you, will not be questioned."

"Good," Fanton said.

He turned and walked close to Stron. He placed both hands on the boy's shoulders and studied his face.

"Karr knew that you had learned all the lessons of life and learned them well. He sent you here for a purpose. If you work for me tonight, you may die, or you may return with the one weapon that can cause the downfall of the tyrant, Nova XX."

Stron did not understand what was happening within him. This man had been able to stir emotions that he had never felt before. He felt that with Fanton's faith, he could overcome any obstacle.

"If Karr thought I was fitted for your work, I am glad to do what you ask of me," he said.

Fanton released his grip and smiled.

"I think Karr was right," he said. "Time will tell. Listen to me, carefully. At one time there were no harem quarters in the palace. The rooms now used for that purpose, belonged to the queen. Below the Queen's bed lies a secret chamber, hidden well under the walls. It was built by the first Sacred Nova as a place where he might rest, and seek retreat from his work."

FANTON was lost in memories of the past. He rubbed his hand lightly across his forehead, as though brushing away the clouds of time that tried to hide his memories.

"When the present King Nova XX took the throne, the secret of the chamber had been lost. Only one man knows where it is today. I am the man. In that cell lies the weapon I must have."

To Fanton, this was a terrible experience. He had hoped that his story might never be told. That the cell would remain sealed forever.

"You, Stron, must go there alone. No man is allowed in the harem but the King himself. The King, curse his soul, uses the bed that held our Sacred Queen while she rested. Nova XX might find you in that chamber. If you are forced to kill him, our cause might be lost. We must have him alive when our weapon is ready to turn upon him, for we wish to destroy his mind and body with torture that will repay him for what he has done to us. On the head-board of the bed, you will find two tiny, golden elves. The elf on the right side must be pressed downward until the lever is slipped out of place and the door to the chamber opens. In the chamber below the room, you will find a chest. Bring it to me. Handle it gently, because you cannot realize what that chest means to our cause."

He stopped talking. His face was gray and he was very tired.

"But how can a small chest contain a weapon that will wipe out our King's great store of war machines," Draco asked.

Fanton shook his head.

"You will have to trust me. It will, if we use it carefully, put Nova XX down to shame and death. It will give Mars peace and contentment for ages to come. Is that a powerful weapon?"

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Draco seemed convinced.

"Let me go," he urged. "I know the palace better than most. I'd like to pay the debt I owe you."

Fanton shook his head.

"You are trying to protect your friend, and I will not let you. Stron has been chosen, both by Karr and myself. Tell Stron what you know of the palace and wait for him outside the walls. If you have ever learned them, speak the prayers of the Sacred Nova that you knew in childhood."

Fanton addressed Stron.

"Remember this. Without the chest, we are lost before we start. Without your help, we are equally lost. Both you and the chest must come back safely. I cannot say why, but I hope the spirit of Karr is alert and protecting you tonight."

There were no more words for him to speak.

"I will do the best I can," Stron said.

THE roof of the palace sloped down and ended a few feet from the west wall. Stron lay atop the wall itself, having jumped to the broad stone ledge from a nearby tree. He pressed himself tightly against the stones, hardly a shadow in the darkness of the night. His body was tanned and the breechcloth, his only garment, kept his knife hidden from any possible glint of light.

The roof of the palace rose gently and became a series of jutting towers and walls, all fine hiding places for a man who could use the shadows.

Below him, he knew that Draco was hidden in the shadow of the huge tree. Draco had already told him where he would find the open court that would lead down to the harem quarters.

Fifteen yards away, the guard who watched the wall, made an about face and marched back, his electro-sword swinging in the scabbard at his side. Stron did not move a muscle. His lips allowed only the slightest movement of breath to escape. His eyes were glittering coldly.

The guard was opposite him. Like the shadow of the *saber cat*, Stron was upon the man, the knife rising, to come down but once. The figure slumped to the wall and lay still.

Stron was beyond him, racing up the slope of the roof. He found the square opening that dropped to the open court below. On his stomach, he unwrapped length upon length of strong rope from his waist. The shadows were deep in the well of stone below him. The moons were not awake. He looped one end of the rope around the jutting stones at his side and payed out the line until there was no more. Slipping silently over the edge of the man-made cliff, he went down hand over hand, swaying slightly, his feet seeking the solid earth below.

He remembered Draco's parting words.

"It will be simple to find the right door. There are four of them, facing all four sides of the courtyard. Enter the one in the direction of the Yomar Range."

He pressed tightly to the wall and moved toward the correct door. Somewhere within the harem quarters, voices of excited, waiting women came to him. He found the door and pushed it open. He was frightened, not because he dared enter Nova XX's private quarters, but because he dared go to the very heart of the palace that had housed the Sacred Nova who first brought life and hope to Mars. The fear slowly quieted in his heart and his nerves steadied once again.

The hall beyond the door was dimly lighted by two torches thrust into stone bowls high against the wall. Ahead of him another door stood ajar. It was fashioned of rich, hand-carved *tuba*

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wood, dragged down from the Yomar stunted forests. On the face of the door, Stron recognized the sacred symbols of the Nova—strangely criss-crossed outlines of the Martian canals.

The door allowed a sword-point of light to escape and slice across the floor. Stealthily, he moved toward it. He stood with his ear to the crack, ready to spring into action the moment he was discovered.

"I am tired and impatient," a voice said crossly. "The others do not quarrel against me. Are you going to be forever unpleasant?"

The King's voice, Stron thought, and his hopes ran high. Then the voice of a girl answered him, and Stron's heart seemed to die.

"As long as I can fight the spell of the love-potions," the soft voice said, "I will fight you. I am not a fool. I know you will overcome me when I can no longer control my own mind."

Stron was at the door, staring in, hoping against hope that this was not Laura, but the voice of some palace harlot that he heard. His eyes, finding the source of the voices, becames flinty with anger.

He saw the huge bed, and recognized the two elfin figures of gold, mounted on the head of it. His eyes halted only momentarily upon the elves, and fell upon the lounging figure of King Nova XX.

NOVA XX was resting across the silken covers, clad in a scarlet robe. He leaned upon one elbow, his satanic, narrowed eyes seeking every pleasant curve of the girl who cowered away from him.

It was Laura. She stood a few feet from the bed, her eyes as cold as death, her fists clenched at her side.

Her body had been dressed by harem attendants who had done, even for her splendid figure, such things as Stron had never dreamed of. Her bosom, taut and rising swiftly as she breathed, was partly hidden beneath silk so sheer that it glowed over her shoulders and down her flesh like a shining waterfall of silver bubbles. Her long hair was drawn back and reached her waist. Cleverly, they had masked the simplicity of her face and painted her cheeks and lips with such crimson magic that she seemed the very personification of romance.

A sea-foam skirt of gold flowed down her hips and ended at the ankles. The golden fabric glittered and parted in folds as she moved, to reveal small promises of the flesh beneath. As Stron stood there, transfixed, the girl backed farther away from the King. He sat up, and leaning back with his elbows supporting his weight, said:

"You do not find the love-potions unpleasant?"

She did not answer, but the sudden color, almost outdoing the rouge already on her cheeks, told him that the days were making her weaker in her will to stay away from him. He smiled.

"I have had many girls brought here," he said. "Some of them were stubborn. After the potion was given them, they seemed to see certain desirable qualities in me that might have first escaped their eyes. You will be no different than the others."

She took a sudden step closer to him.

"Why do you torture me like this?"

The King's teeth gleamed in a sudden smile.

"It is torture, isn't it? Let me see. You have been forced to swallow the potion each sun for seven suns. You are growing very lonely, aren't you, Laura?"

The girl's head bent in shame.

"I—am lonely."

The smile softened.

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"The others are lonely, also," he said craftily. "They come to me and we talk, and seek comfort in each other's voices. Do you hate me now, Laura?"

Her face was flushed. Her fists clenched and unclenched. Stron, perspiration standing out on his face, longed to rush into the room and send his knife deeply into the King's heart. He remembered Fanton's words, and waited.

The girl moved toward Nova XX hesitatingly. She was fighting against the clear heady strength of the drug that worked upon her emotions and destroyed her mind. She seated herself timidly beside him.

"I did hate you once," she said, as though wondering how she had been able to do so. "I'm—afraid of you."

He placed one hand on her shoulder and she shuddered under the touch. She did not try to pull away.

"You are more beautiful than all the rest," he told her.

She swayed slowly toward him and stiffened. Her eyes regarded him gravely.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it is true," he told her. "You have such charms as queens possess. I feel almost awed in your presence."

At that moment, the spell of the drug was deepest. He had used every word, every moment, with all the skill he possessed. Suddenly he swept her against him and pressed eager, hard lips to hers. Her body flexed and pressed backward. Her arms sought his neck.

Deep within the girl, she fought to break the spell that made her seek his caress. At last the fight had been won and she was able, for at least another few hours, to remember what a horrible thing she was doing.

Her hand came upward suddenly and her finger nails slashed at his face. The King jumped away from her, and swore loudly. His cheek carried the deep, bleeding marks of her nails.

"You little fool!"

She sprang away from him, her hands held to her cheeks, eyes wide with awakened fear.

He sprang to his feet and went toward her slowly, one hand held to the brand she had placed on his face. His fingers were red with blood.

"I'll kill you for that."

STRON sprang through the door. He saw Laura look straight at him and heard her scream. King Nova XX turned and his lips opened. The shout of warning never came from them. Stron's arm swept out and the thick handle of the knife hit him across the chin. The King went down, his mouth bleeding, staring with silent fear at the man above him.

Laura was in Stron's arms, her sobs breaking the silence of the chamber.

"Stron—oh, Stron. I couldn't—help. . ."

He pressed his hand to her shoulder and held her face close to his chest.

"I know," he whispered. "I heard what you said. You couldn't fight them all."

She drew away from him, eyes moist, her face streaked with tears.

"They locked me in my room. They forced me to take a drug that changed my brain to a useless, pampered thing. I forgot everything but love and passion. Stron, I almost forgot you. He—he is clever, Stron. He knew how long I could fight against him, and tonight, I almost . . ."

He pressed his strong fingers against her lips.

"You are Karr's daughter," he said. "You have the courage to forget what has happened, and help me escape from this place with you."

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The tears were gone. The faith in him was there. She was ready to do his bidding.

"Stron, I—I was lonely, but now I know—it was for you."

Her lips were an inch from his. Her eyes were clear and sure of themselves.

He kissed her, not gently this time. Not a brother's kiss. Her arms sought his waist and held him. His lips were desperate and hard, seeking to find what lay in the heart of this girl. Her own mouth against his told him. Slowly, reluctantly he drew away.

"Find a way of securing the door," he said. "We have no more time to stay here."

She backed away from him, wonder in her eyes. Wonder—and shame.

"Stron—it wasn't the love potion that made me kiss you like that."

He cursed silently. He knew what she meant. Brother—and sister. Love that would have made even Karr ashamed of him.

"Better forget it," he said, and his voice was brutal. "I'm a fool. Lock the door before we die here in this rat's trap."

He broke the spell. She rushed to the door. While she made it secure, Stron tore the bed-cover into strips, tied the King tightly and placed a heavy gag in his mouth. As she watched him, he found the elf and pushed it downward swiftly. As though by clock-work the huge bed started moving away from the wall. The King's eyes were open. He lay still on the floor, watching the bed swing out to reveal a dark, square hole in the wall behind it.

Stron said:

"Wait for me, Laura. If you hear anyone coming, call me."

As thoug hypnotized, she nodded, her eyes never leaving his face.

He went through the dark entrance and felt his way slowly down a flight of steps. Cold, stale air came up from below. The smell of the tomb filled his nostrils.

He reached the level stones that told him he was at the bottom. Feeling his way along the wall, his hands touched a soft article. Exploring it with his hands, he guessed it was a torn, worn couch, perhaps the resting place of the first Nova who came here to ponder.

He cursed, for there was no light.

"The chest is in the center of the room," Fanton had told him. "There is a stone altar there, upon which it rests."

HE COULD see nothing in the inky blackness. Moving toward what he guessed would be the center of the dark crypt, his knee struck something hard and he fell forward. His hands, grasping for some support, closed over a small, carved box-like object. He explored the surface of the thing with his finger-tips and was satisfied.

It was heavy and he carried it carefully, seeking the stairs that led upward. A faint shaft of light came down now, to lead him forward—upward, to the entrance to the crypt.

In the room, Laura waited and saw him come. She nodded, signaling him that they were still safe. Stron looked at the thing in his hands. It was about eighteen inches long and half as wide and thick. The chest was finely wrought of pure, yellow gold. He could not locate the cleverly concealed lid, for the edges were hidden under carefully carved ferns and tall, column-like reproductions of the palace supporting pillars.

"Open the door, he told Laura quietly. "Throw a robe about you. Choose a dark one, so that we will not be seen. Go to the court beyond the hall and make sure that there is no one there. Then come for me."

Swiftly, she jerked a dark blue cover

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from the bed and wrapped it over the shimmering loveliness of her costume. She was out of the door and gone as silently as a shadow. With the chest still held tightly against him, Stron looked down at the silent, flushed king.

"The great Nova XX," he said through clenched teeth. "You owe your life to a promise I made. I hope I live until the promise can be forgotten and I can slash your sneering face to ribbons. Go look for the secret of the cell beneath the room. It will do you no good."

Laura was in the doorway, motioning for him to come. He spat calmly in the King's face.

"A slight token for what you tried to do to my sister," he said.

In the court-yard, he placed the chest carefully on the earth and spoke to the girl.

"Are you strong enough to climb the rope?"

For an answer, she grasped it between both hands and went up into the darkness above him. A great pride throbbed in Stron's heart. This was still the girl who had fought her way across the Yomars. Still Karr's daughter, strong and ready to fight once more.

When the movement of the rope told him she was at the top, he tied the chest carefully, wrapping all the cord he could spare around the middle of it. Hand over hand, his legs swinging free, he reached the roof and crouched there. Laura's breath was warm against his cheek. Her hand touched his arm and stayed there.

He started to pull the burden up, hand over hand. Once he thought he was going to lose it, for the chest swung too far and hit the wall. He let it stay there until all the sway was gone from the rope. Then, slowly, he tried again. It came over the top and thudded gently on the roof.

"A friend waits below the wall," he said softly. "Follow me at a distance. If anything happens, hide as quickly as you can. Get to the wall and jump. He will help you."

HE PUT the chest under his arm, and leaving the rope where it hung, moved toward the spot where he had left the body of the guard. Laura remained behind him, and he lost her in the black well of night.

Suddenly he stopped short, not twenty feet from the place he had first occupied on the palace wall. Voices, soft and full of anger, came from ahead of him. He searched the darkness, and saw them, two Honor Guards bent over the corpse he had left behind.

Before he could make any definite plan, one of them stood up and placed a small object to his lips. A high-pitched, silvery whistle sounded. From far away, the answer came. Then a trumpet sounded beyond the harem quarters.

The palace had been warned.

Without caution, Stron dashed forward. The chest was in his arms because he could not risk leaving it behind now. As he ran, he called:

"Laura. Run for the wall. They won't give us much time."

He looked back, seeing the girl's dark shadow as it moved like the wind away at another angle.

He hit the two amazed guards with the power of an enraged beast, the knife in his free hand, slashing and gouging away through the wall of human flesh. One of them went down at once, but Stron did not pause to attack the other. He scanned the length of dark stone and saw Laura leap outward toward freedom. That was all he wanted to know. He turned and sent the blade spinning through the air at the oncoming Honor Guard. The blade struck with a thud, and the man fell, tangling with his dead

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companion.

"*Draco!*"

A shadow moved from the side of the tree below and Draco's voice came up to him.

"Stron—I was worried. In a minute, I would have come after you."

Stron didn't wait to reassure him.

"Catch the chest," he said, and held it out away from the wall so that it would fall free.

"Ready," Draco said.

The box fell, faint light rippling across its surface, and landed in Draco's outstretched arms. Stron leaped after it.

"Find Fanton quickly," he said. "The alarm is sounded. I will take care of myself."

Draco was gone.

Stron raced along the wall toward the place he had seen Laura jump. He almost knocked her over in the darkness. A moment later, she was cradled in his arms and he was running through the dark streets, toward the tunnels, and the cave room where Fanton would be waiting.

KING NOVA XX sat on his throne once more, self control returned, his dark, searching eyes on the small, gray haired man who had dared come alone to speak to him.

"Fanton," Nova XX said, "What is to prevent me killing you, now that you are in my power?"

There was something magnificent about Fanton's courage. His garb was poor, yet every line of his body and face was the mark of a gentleman and soldier.

"You could easily murder me, Nova," he said.

Nova XX nodded, a cruel smile playing on his lips.

"But you think I won't, is that correct?"

Fanton did not smile, but his eyes were twinkling.

"I asked for a truce, before I came here. Every person in Novark knows that you granted that truce. If I do not leave the palace alive, and within the hour, every person in the city will know that you betrayed that promise. I don't think even you dare to keep on acting against the will of the people."

Quick anger flitted across Nova XX's face. He leaned forward, one hand resting on his knee.

"What do you want? Has your visit something to do with the gold chest you had stolen from the palace?"

Fanton's expression betrayed nothing. Let the King guess.

"I have come to offer you an opportunity to get rid of me and my men, once and for all. Nova XX, King of all Mars, can rid himself of his enemies by granting one simple request."

The King sneered.

"A splendid offer, I'm sure. I'll rid myself of you in a few years, as matters stand. Perhaps sooner. Why should I fear a few tunnel rats who cannot fight back, but must run and hide under the city?"

Fanton's eyes were sudden flashing fire.

"Because," he said coolly, "our power is increasing. Some day we will have open revolt. You know that is true, whether you admit it or not. Now I give you a chance to grant my request, and play your trump card against me."

The King swore at him.

"What is this crazy scheme you have in mind. I will listen, if it pleases me to hear the joke you tell."

Fanton came closer to the throne. His voice was shaking with emotion.

"I have discovered a weapon that will make you fall to your knees and ask for mercy. I will not use it—yet."

Nova XX laughed aloud.

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"It *is* a joke," he said. "Go on."

Fanton's face was flushed. Usually calm, he spoke hurriedly, almost as though he feared that his mission might fail.

"Issue a proclamation to the people. Tell them that Nova XX and his guards, their arms discarded, will meet Fanton and his men in the royal courtyard, for the purpose of discussing a truce. Promise, by your word, that the men of Fanton will not be harmed during this meeting. Then, give me the opportunity to show you the weapon I have in my possession. All the people of Novark can come. Everyone will be protected from the weapons of your guards during our discussion, and there will be no violence."

In spite of himself, Nova XX was curious. What had Fanton unearthed that made him as brave as this?"

"I will make the arrangement on one condition," he said. "If you do not impress me with this great weapon of yours, I will give you until the appointed hour to get out of the palace yard. Then I'll turn all the weapons in my arsenal upon you and your followers. I'll blow the tunnels out of the earth, even though it destroys Novark in the process. I'll blast the last bit of resistance from you. Do you dare go on with your truce, in the face of my temper?"

"If we are safe, so long as we stand with you and if we are given a short period to leave afterwards. We will take our chances."

The King was no longer sneering. Not even a trace of a smile lighted his stern face.

"It's a promise," he said. "You'll be given only long enough to get out of the courtyard, before my Honor Guards are upon you with every war machine I possess."

Fanton's face was pale. Courage did not fail him. It was all or nothing now.

"It's a bargain," he said quietly. "The proclamation must be posted where every person in Novark can read it and vouch for the royal seal."

Without another word, he turned and left the throne room. His old shoulders were erect and his step was firm.

THE proclamation, prepared with the royal seal, was posted on every street in the city of Novark. Men and women read it, and gathered in groups to talk in hushed voices. Fanton at last had decided to act, and most of them were glad. Either the King would destroy Fanton, or Novark would have a chance at last to fight for freedom.

"Fanton and his outlawed tribe will be given the freedom of entering the royal courtyard on the day of the seventh sun of the present time period. Fanton will meet and talk with King Nova XX, Son of the Sacred House of Nova. He will present a weapon, 'so deadly that it will cause Nova XX to fall to his knees and beg for mercy.'

"Fanton's challenge has been accepted by the Sacred King. If at the end of the period of truce, Fanton has not caused the sacred monarch to tremble in his boots, he will leave the palace courtyard at once. At the moment he leaves, the Honor Guards of the House of Nova, will destroy Fanton and his men in the streets of Novark.

"This is according to an agreement made between the Sacred King Novar XX and the man, Fanton.

"The Royal Seal of Nova
"affixed by His Sacred Majesty
"King Nova XX."

This was the proclamation, and both

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Fanton and Nova XX were well satisfied, each in his own way.

* * *

"Nova XX thinks he is safe in promising this," Draco said sharply. "If you fail, Fanton, we'll be wiped out in the streets. We'll never have a chance."

Three men and a slightly built girl, wrapped in a blue robe, sat in the tiny stone chamber. Fanton's eyes regarded Draco without fear.

"Ten thousand followers place complete faith in me," he said. "I would not betray them lightly. I hesitated to do this, but I have never been more sure that I am doing the right thing."

He looked at Stron.

"Without your help, we could never have acted as we have. My hopes were placed in you and I will continue to rely upon the man whom Karr sent to me."

"But the weapon," Draco persisted. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm ready to die helping you. What chance have we, with our one small chest, against the thousand huge weapons of war gathered up by Nova XX?"

Fanton shook his head.

"Tomorrow, you will know. I hope I am right. I feel sure that I am. I can say no more now."

He seemed very tired. They wondered if this one man, fighting against the most modern war machine among the planets, could win. The odds were all against him.

THE gates of the courtyard were open. A huge, marble throne had been placed on a high platform in the center of the open yard. A brightly colored cloth was hung over the throne so that Nova XX could sit on the platform away from the rays of the sun.

The city had come to life. Thousands of peasants came during the night, trekking down from the Yomars, following the straight, arrow-like canals from the lush farm country.

The Honor Guards had stacked their electro-swords neatly along the stone stairs that led into the palace itself. Fire-cannon pushed their ugly snouts from the stone walls that surrounded the square.

The peasants still streamed into the yard, and filled the streets beyond the wall. They knew that their very power of numbers would make them safe. In a mob, there is courage. In a few unarmed men, courage can live but it does not last when faced with death.

Nova XX was already seated and waiting when Fanton came through the mob and waited for his companions to climb to the platform ahead of him. Nova with beady, suspicious eyes, recognized Draco carrying the golden chest carefully in his arms. Then, they stood around him in a half circle, the girl Laura who had torn the flesh from his face, and the man Stron, who had made him a laughing stock, both in the arena, and the day he had tied and gagged the King in his own bed-chamber. Nova XX looked them all over slowly and smiled at Fanton. It wasn't a pleasant smile.

The throng below the platform closed in. The tops of the buildings near the outer wall were covered with humanity. Not another man or woman could force themselves into the place.

"A fine group of thieves you have brought to me," Nova XX said harshly. "It will be a pleasure to deal with them each personally."

His eyes caressed Laura's, but she did not look away. Such scorn and hatred he had never seen in a woman's eyes before. He looked quickly at Fanton, escaping her gaze.

"We have wasted enough time," he shouted. "This truce has been a foolish one, for it can end only in death for

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you. Say what you have to say, and frighten me out of my wits if you can, but do it soon. The sun is uncomfortable and I need rest."

Fanton turned and ignoring Nova XX, addressed the crowd who looked up at him from the courtyard. He raised his voice so that it carried clearly beyond the walls.

"People of Novark, I have been branded a weakling and a fool. I am an outlaw in the eyes of the King, and he hopes to destroy me and my men before this day ends."

He paused, and then went on:

"I have brought a weapon here that will not only frighten King Nova XX, but put him in a position that will leave all the people in Mars free to become their own masters again."

A great cheer went up. A cheer long suppressed but inspired now by a confident leader.

"What does he think he's doing," Draco said in a whisper to Stron. "He cannot save us, not with this box."

Stron did not answer. He had heard Fanton refer to him.

"Karr, the giant of the canal country, sent a boy to me. When he came, I knew that the time had come to overthrow our tyrant king."

Nova XX leaped to his feet. Fanton turned and said:

"Remember, Nova, I come under a truce. Surely my words cannot make a man of your power, forget his promise to an entire people."

Nova XX sank back, his eyes as hard as black stone, fists clenched.

"During the best years of my life," Fanton shouted, "I lived in the Sacred Palace of Nova, and labored as Court Physician to the kings and queens of the Sacred family. You know how our present King came to power, but first, I will show you the weapon I brought here, which will overthrow him."

Draco came forward with the chest and Fanton took it from him. He searched for a tiny golden key, hidden in his tunic. While everyone gaped at him, he unlocked the chest and lifted the lid.

A loud groan came from the throng. On the platform, Nova XX came to his feet, a puzzled grin on his face. Draco swore aloud.

"He has gone crazy," he said.

CUSHIONED on the white lining of the chest, were the bones and tiny clothes of a baby.

Fanton's voice rose to quiet the disappointed crowd.

"Many years ago, a good king and his queen lived here. A child was born to them. It was a girl child, and she died a few hours after her birth. The King knew his subjects were waiting for a boy child, to proclaim it their prince and next king.

"I was the Physician who attended the birth. By the King's orders, I hurried to the House of Lost Children and brought a strongly built, clean limbed child to take the place of the dead princess. In doing so, I committed a horrible crime against my people. The peasant baby, shown to the people as the next King Nova, is now Nova XX, your leader. He is not of Nova blood. His life was created along the canals, and his flesh came from flesh of the canal people."

King Nova XX sprang to his feet, hands clutched above his head. Over the rising shouts of the mob, he made his voice heard.

"Captain of the Guards. Cut them down. They lie. They lie. Shoot every last ruffian who came here."

Guards, standing close to the platform, stared about them with frightened eyes. Should they obey? If they used their weapons now, with the truce

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in power, what would happen to them? They were strong, yet they could not brave the entire force of a country's people. They hesitated, and Fanton was once more reaching the mob with his voice.

"The tiny body in the casket has the bone structure of the Sacred Nova family. *On your throne sits a man who sweats and cries out in rage, because he is not even a son of a king. He is a peasant of low stock who can rule only with hatred and blood.*

"Mars must have a King. He was a bad choice."

He drew from the casket, a folded parchment scroll. He unrolled it and read:

"I, Fanton, acting in the orders of the King of Mars, have placed this body of the Queen's Princess in a golden casket and hidden it below the palace walls. A peasant child, by the King's orders, and chosen from good stock, has been accepted by the King and Queen in the place of the dead child. If I am ever in a position where my own life is in danger because of this deed, I have been given permission to show this paper and the signature of Nova, together with this seal, which will prove that I am not personally to blame, but have acted by his will and judgment."

Fanton looked up.

"This scroll is affixed with the Sacred signature and seal of the Nova family," he cried.

The King was rushing toward Fanton and before he could be stopped, had grasped the casket in both hands and lifted it above his head.

Stron reached him in time to keep the tiny body in the golden chest from being dashed to the ground. Nova XX stood there without moving a muscle. His face wore a mask of hatred and fear. Stron's arms gripped him, twisting his arms behind his back.

"It's a lie," Nova cried. "Prove that these tales are true. Prove that an outlaw, hidden in the tunnels of Novark, has been able to keep this secret for so long, and now dares face your Sacred King with the story. I'll have him destroyed, and the rest of you with him!"

THE crowd was hushed instantly. An undercurrent of fear still ran far below the surface.

A voice said:

"Your proof, Fanton? Proof, and we will stand behind you!"

Fanton smiled. It was a hard smile now.

"I never wanted to expose Nova XX," he said. "If he had been a good king, I would never have come forward. I did not want to tell the truth about what happened. Something happened that made me remember what I owed to others. Karr died, and sent his son, Stron, to me. Karr and I had sworn many years ago not to betray what we knew. Karr, by sending Stron to me, sent the message that it was time to act."

No one was more bewildered than Stron, now. His arms still gripping the King in steel embrace, he hung on Fanton's every word.

"Ten years after Nova XX became Prince in the palace, another boy was born. Already, Nova XX had power among his own kind. If he learned of a brother in the palace, he would have had him murdered at once.

"The King was beginning to have doubts about Nova XX, and his ability to be a good son. The King told me to spirit the newborn son away and hide him with a friend, until he could make a decision."

Fanton looked scornfully at Nova XX.

"Unfortunately, the King was right.

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Before he and the Queen could escape the palace, Nova XX, then only a boy, hired a band of robbers to murder his father and mother. He took the throne, and amid false tears, told the people that he would search for and murder every last assassin. This is recorded history, and no one can deny it. Further, no murderer was ever caught or punished."

Cries of approval came from all directions. Memories of the incident were still fresh.

"Hear me out," Fanton shouted. "Perhaps you can guess. Karr was the friend to whom I took the baby prince. He lived with Karr and when I left the palace at Nova XX's orders, I could no longer betray what had happened. If Nova XX had suspected, he would have had the boy murdered before the sun went down. When Karr sent the grown man to me, I knew that Karr was saying: 'The Prince has grown now, and will fight his own battles.'

"It was only then that I had the courage to do the thing I should have done long ago."

"The proof," Nova XX screamed. "It's all a story. The proof!"

He struggled to free himself, but the stunned Stron held him tighter than ever.

"You *have* proof, Fanton?" the man in the crowd shouted.

Fanton's smile softened.

"You should be able to guess," he said. "Make Nova XX submit to the *micro-plaz* test. The machine will show the bone structure of the King, of Stron, and of the infant in the casket. The bone structure of every Nova who ever ruled Mars, is entirely different than our own. Will that be proof?"

They knew that Fanton had won. The false king knew it also. He raged and fought to release himself. His own guards did not move to help him. The mob swept forward and like a tidal wave, over the platform. Men picked Stron up and held him above their shoulders. Some of them grasped the false king and a shout went up from the crowd.

"Put the great Nova XX before the *micro-plaz*. Show him up for the peasant and fool that he is."

The place was packed now with happy, celebrating people.

Nova XX broke loose and started to fight his way through the crowd. He slipped a small, jewelled dagger from beneath his robe and ran toward Fanton. Draco, a cunning grin on his face, closed in. The king tried to push him away but Draco slammed a great fist into his face and sent him down, blood gushing from his nose. Draco reached down and threw him over his shoulder like a limp sack.

"Make way," he cried out. "We'll put the peasant to the *micro-plaz* test and satisfy the justice that he always scorned."

The mob was moving now. It was gathering speed, and carried along, on the shoulders above it, were Stron, bewildered, overcome with emotion, the little old man Fanton, with tears in his eyes, and the girl who had fought a false king, and won her battle.

The two of them were close, although they could not reach each other as the throng carried them down the streets, toward the Novark laboratories. The looks that flashed between them, and the message in their eyes, was not the love felt between brother and sister.

THE night was very dark, and far away beyond the crest of the Yomar Range, twin moons came up and were shining peacefully on the deserted hut of Karr, the shepherd.

In the palace of Nova, Stron sat alone thinking of Karr, and his memories

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made him lonely. It was very strange, this being made a Sacred King over a great planet, and he had only lived in pomp and splendor for a few hours.

He stared dreamily at the warm fire that burned in metal braziers, making the small chamber pleasant. This was his private room, where he could sit alone and ponder over the problems that had soon to be faced. A knock sounded at the door and he arose, opening it, to find Laura smiling at him.

"It's odd," he told her, as she came into the room. "I can't make myself call you Queen. Have you rested and eaten?"

The girl nodded. She came to him and sat down on the huge lounge, putting her head against his shoulder.

"Stron, are you lonely for the canals, the adventure of the Yomars. For Karr?"

Stron didn't answer for a long time. It was true that he hadn't been content in the palace, but it was all new and strange to him.

"Yes," he admitted. "But you see, Karr planned it this way. Many times I was ashamed, because I felt strange emotions toward you. I was afraid of myself. Karr made me promise to stay near you always."

The room seemed more pleasant with her here. It was late and he had not eaten. Laura had sat in the great dining room with Draco and Fanton, and Stron for a short time, felt as though he was alone in the strange place, without plans, without the will to do the thing he had to do.

"Karr trained us for this destiny," he said. "He was watching over us even through the battle. He knew that we would cease being brother and sister. Knew that we would be King and Queen. That's why I stayed here alone tonight, Laura. For a while, I felt as though it was too much. As though, even with your help, and Fanton and Draco with me, I couldn't rule an entire planet and do it as I should."

Her eyes rose and met his.

"You are convinced that this is the place where you belong? That we can help you, and make you realize that being a King is just being honest with yourself and your people?"

He nodded and smiled.

"The spell is past," he said. "I feel a lot better now."

Laura put both arms around him and drew him close to her.

"Fanton and Draco have been teasing me," she said with a mocking pout. "They are cruel."

Stron looked startled, and then saw the twinkle in her eyes.

"What have those two been up to?"

Laura buried her face in his shoulder.

"They've been talking for the past hour about the future of the Sacred Family. They seem very worried over you. Why didn't you come to dinner with your new wife? Why did you look so somber? Was love dead already?"

Stron chuckled.

"So a king cannot sulk in his room."

Laura was very quiet. Then she said.

"Draco and Fanton said things were coming to a pretty pass when we have been married for three long days, and no news has been given to them concerning an heir to the throne."

Stron was shocked.

"And what did you say?"

Laura's voice, buried deep against his chest, was very timid.

"I blushed and ran away from them. I came here."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide with admiration and love.

"Stron," she said softly. "Don't ever be lonely, not with me near you."

Stron said nothing. He couldn't with his lips pressed to hers . . .

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SHADOW SUPERSTITIONS

By KAY BENNETT

PRIMITIVE man was veritably steeped in mystery. Even his shadow was a mystery to him. It was considered a part of the individual's personality. A person's shadow was not allowed to be reflected in a river for fear that a crocodile might snatch it and bring disaster to its owner. The shadow was associated with the soul or spirit of the person. The Zulus thought that at death the shadow of man would depart from the corpse and become an ancestral spirit. There is in folk-lore of Europe, stories of shadowless men. As an example, in classic literature it is said that the dead in Purgatory knew that Dante was alive when they saw that, unlike theirs, his figure cast a shadow on the ground.

Even the pulse was given a spiritual significance by the Caribs. They thought that man's soul dwelt in the heart. They had one word to identify soul, life, and heart. The act of breathing in connection with the difficulties of the respiratory system toward the end of life, has been identified with the soul itself. Some Greenlanders gave two souls to man, namely his shadow and his breath. The Malays say that the soul of a dying man escapes through his nostrils.

Among some primitive folk the association of personal animation with the pupil of the eye led to mystic ideas. It was considered a sign of bewitchment when, approaching death, the customary image disappeared from the dim eyeballs of the sick person.

* * *

EGYPTIANS' SACRED ANIMALS

By PETE BOGG

THE Egyptians associated sacred animals with their deities, and because of this many of them were treated with great respect. The bull was one of the most sacred animals. Dogs deserved homage because they guided Iris when she was searching for Osiris. The hawk was held in reverence because a hawk brought to the priests of Thebes a book, tied up with a scarlet thread, which contained the rites and ceremonies observed in the worship of the gods.

The wolf was given great respect because Osiris arose from the infernal regions in the shape of a wolf, and assisted Iris and her son, Horus, to battle against Typhon. The cat was revered as a symbol of the moon because of its nocturnal activities. The goat was respected as the representation of manhood because of its complete vigor, and was worshiped for causing the people of that country to multiply.

If anyone killed one of the sacred animals willfully, he was killed. If he killed a sacred animal accidentally, his punishment was left to the judgment of the priests. But if a man killed a hawk, cat, or an ibis purposely or not, he was executed without mercy. During a severe famine when the Egyptians became cannibals, no one was known to have killed and eaten one of the sacred bulls.

* * *

WARNINGS OF DEATH

By SANDY MILLER

DEATH omens of all kinds are found among superstitious people. Mysterious knockings and unaccountable sounds are considered signs of the death of a relative. According to English folklore, three loud knocks on the head of the bed of a sick person, is a sure sign that death is not far off. The howling of dogs, and lowing of cattle, or crowing of roosters at night was supposed to foretell the death of a neighbor. Dogs were thought to be able to see death as it entered a dwelling, and therefore begin the weird howling. The clicking of certain beetles calling to their mates was regarded as ominous and these insects were called the "death watch." There was the belief that if a dead body remained limp, another death in the family would follow soon. In seaport towns it was the common belief that the souls of the dying passed out with the tide. The falling of a portarit or a statue was thought to be symbolic of that person's death. Some people believed in this myth so strongly that it probably was the indirect cause of many deaths. For instance, there is the case of Archbishop Laud finding his portrait lying broken on the floor. He accepted it as his death knell and prepared for the end. He actually worried himself to death.

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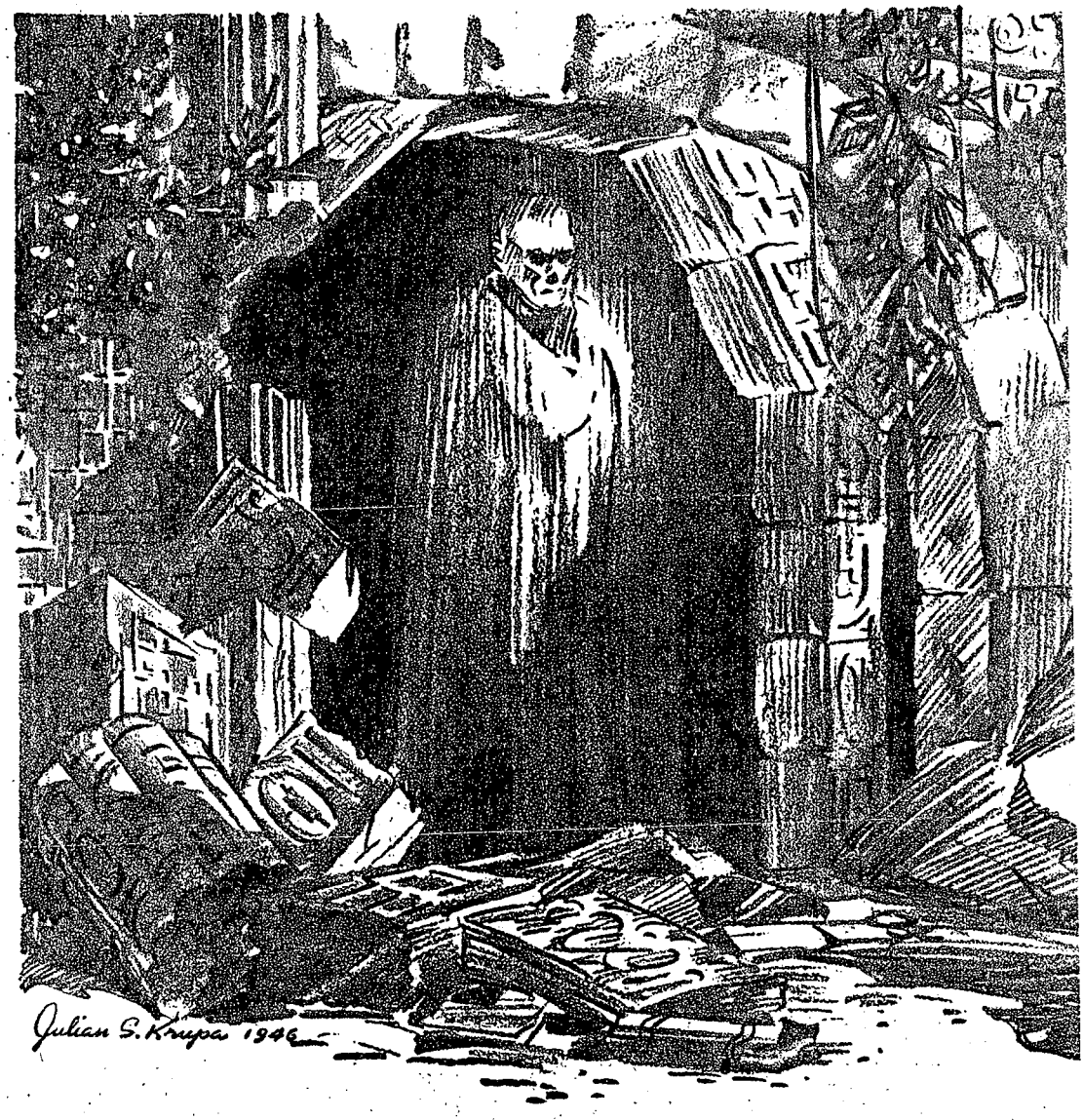

CARRION CRYPT

by RICHARD CASEY

It was a crypt where, they said, the dead lay uneasy. But some men are unafraid of death — until they face it

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It seemed to him as if the old Lama were standing there, in the opening of the crypt—watching, waiting . . .

IT ISN'T a pleasant task to record the story of Jason Ford. Ford was one of those strange men who spend their lives snooping into the strange corners of the world.

Jason Ford was a member of the Explorers' Club, and that's the one thing we had in common. We were, if I'm allowed to stretch the point a bit, both explorers. However, I confine my wandering to the safer places of the world. I like Mexico, and the deep valleys of Alaska. Jason Ford didn't fit into the "local" class.

I recall expressing admiration for Ford's courage in making several trips into the forbidden territory of Tibet.

"To my way of thinking," I said one night as we sat in the lounge, "Tibet is a part of the world that I wouldn't

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mind flying over, but it would be like poison to get dropped into."

Jason Ford downed his shot of scotch, which I had learned he could drink in vast quantities without any visible effect. His face, very tanned from a recent trip to Africa, suddenly showed tired, worried lines. He leaned back in the well worn leather chair and sighed.

"Tibet once held a great attraction for me," he confessed. "There are times when I feel that I'd like to go back. I'm afraid all the doors are locked and barred against my return."

I was amazed.

"But the Barnes-Ferris caravan came out only two months ago. Surely . . .?"

He nodded.

"I said that *I* was forbidden to enter Tibet. There are others who come and go with no trouble."

I was on the scent of a good story. I ordered another bottle of scotch from the bar, and bit by bit, I got the story from Ford. He didn't enjoy telling it, but I knew it was one of those things that *had* to be told. It had been gnawing away inside of him until it had become a raw sore.

"I WAS at Tashi-Lunpo that year," Jason Ford said. "I had been invited to witness the Tibetan New Year, and would gain a personal interview with the highest of all high, the Grand Lama."

I nodded.

"The man who is God in human body. The supreme being."

Jason Ford's eyes were suddenly alive with fire. It was as though in these magic moments, he had been bodily transported back to Tibet.

"Heavenly Buddha of Measureless Light," he almost whispered. "Although I *did* witness the celebration of the New Year, and spoke to the Grand Lama many times, these incidents do not have any direct bearing upon my story.

"The Grand Lama and I became fast friends. I believe that everyone who saw him, worshipped him for his wonderful goodness."

I was amazed at his sincerity. I was amazed at his sincerety. I had always imagined Jason Ford as a hard-headed, hard hitting realist.

"You weren't converted to the faith?"

As I spoke, I knew that I was making a mistake. It was none of my business. I know that my own faith has certain dogmas which it cannot escape. Who was I to judge what was right and wrong?

"Every man to his faith," Jason admitted. "One must live in Tibet to understand. The vastness of it. The cold, icy grandeur of it. One must renounce the world and learn the ageless secrets of Tibet. One must forget all else."

I didn't interrupt him, and he went on speaking in a dreamy voice.

"I decided to stay in Tibet. I adopted the cloak and peaked cap of the monks. I resigned myself to the lonely life of the monastery."

He smiled bitterly. I swear that he was reliving those days in wind-swept Tibet. Jason Ford had returned in spirit to the roof of the world, and could once more hear the temple drums and the steady clicking of the prayer wheels.

"I was sure of myself. I was very sure. *Om-mani-padme-hum.*"

The last phrase was a soft sign. He smiled at me.

"Salvation is found only in true faith," he said.

His hands were clenched.

"Once I went to the Temple of Linga. I should never have gone there. I en-

(Continued on page 170)

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READER'S PAGE

HE WANTS CAVE STORIES

Dear Sir:

I have just finished my second reading of the May FA, and as usual read the Editor's Notebook to see if the stories lived up to expectations. I am glad to say they surpassed it by a good light year.

All the stories were excellent, and I feel justified in asking on my part and for a lot of other readers I know for more stories by men like Elroy Arno and Lee Francis. We all agreed that "The Emperor's Eye" was tops. We put "Shades of Henry Morgan" second, and O'Brien's "Painting of the Prophet" third.

Coming in a sad fourth was Shaver's "Tale of the Red Dwarf." *Mr. Shaver!* From an unfailing first—to fourth! Please shoot the "Red Dwarf" and give us another cave story! *Please!*

Charles Henry,
P. O. Box 145,
Big Run, Pa.

Glad you liked "The Emperor's Eye" so well. And as to Shaver—it isn't the policy of FA to run cave stories—that right is reserved for our big sister magazine, Amazing Stories. Just keep reading Amazing and you'll get the latest dope about the caves. In FA, Mr. Shaver will use his unusual talents at sheer fantasy—with, of course, the possibility that his stories in FA, as he says, may not be all fantasy!.....Ed.

YEARLY REPORT

Dear Sir:

I would like to drop a short note before I forget giving my ratings for FA during 1946. In the February issue "Toka And the Man Bats" took top honors. In May came the terrific yarn, "Land of the Big Blue Apples." In July a newcomer stole everything—Thomas Kelley, for his "He Who Saw Tomorrow." The September issue had the novel nosed out by a short, entitled, "The Mirror." And the November issue gave us the battle of the century with "Shadow of the Sphinx" and "The Moving Finger" fighting lustily. We'll call it a draw. The best artists of the year were Ruth, Finlay, McCauley, and St. John. As for the future, let the good old-timers have free reign. Writers like Williams, Wilcox, Livingston, and others. O.K.?

Jack Clements,
6310 Madison Rd.,
Cincinnati 27, Ohio.

Thanks for the ratings, Jack, but don't let a year slip by now before we hear from you again. And don't worry about the old-timers. They'll be pitching some mighty powerful yarns your way in the near future. Watch for them ...—Ed.

COMMENTS PRO AND CON

Dear Sir:

This is my first attempt at writing a fan letter of any kind, and my main reason for doing it is to air out a few gripes about an otherwise perfect stf magazine. First, the Reader's Page. Wonderful! But there isn't enough of it! Please sirs, can't Ye Eds do something about it?

Then, I like Shaver, but why not leave him in Amazing, the magazine he is best suited for—and devote more space to writers like Wilcox. (Wishful thinking?) So much for the gripes. Am I asking too much? Aside from this, my favorite authors in FA are writers like Wilcox (bless him), Chet Geier, whose "Forever Is Too Long" was really tops, and guys like Williams, O'Brien, and Yerxa. By the way, what ever happened to one of the best writers in stf—Eando Binder?

George E. Davis,
2794 Plumas,
Reno, Nevada.

Thanks for the letter, George, and we hope that this will only be the beginning for your letting us know your likes and dislikes. First, as to Shaver, we think, as do most of our readers, that Dick's stuff in FA is top fantasy, and belongs there. Next, the Reader's Page. O.K., you have a good gripe, and shortly we'll try and correct this fault. You can count on it. As to your favorite authors, well and good. But two of them—O'Brien and Yerxa, are no longer with us. Dave was killed in action during the war, and Yerxa died a little over a year ago. But their memory lingers on.....As to Binder, we understand he is doing comic book work these days. Maybe he'll come back to the fold.....Ed.

MORE BESTS OF THE YEAR

Dear Sir:

I would like to congratulate you on the very fine story in your last issue, "The Emperor's Eye." The "Red Dwarf" was good too, but Yerxa ran off with the honors. My favorites for last year were in order: "Minions of the Tiger," "To Watch By Night," "Shadow of the Sphinx," and "Forever Is Too Long."

James W. Ayers,
609 1st St.,
Attalla, Ala.

A nice short, but to the point summing up, we'd say. All in all, from these reports, we'd say you readers are "on the ball."....Ed.

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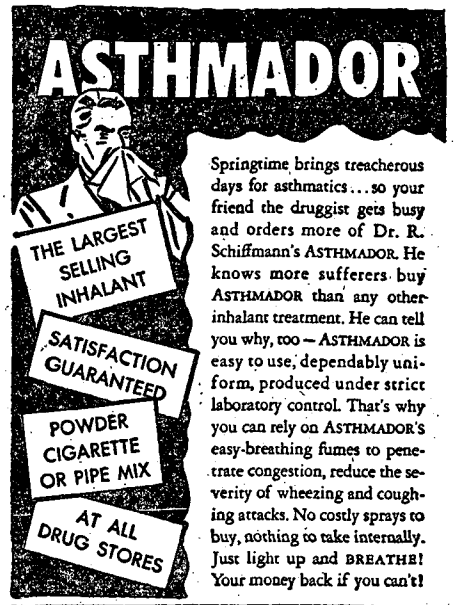

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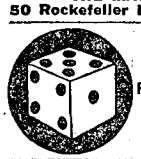

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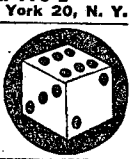

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CARRION CRYPT

(Continued from page 168)

tered the long, dark hall, and still new at the monastry, I was frightened and awed by the place. Sacrificial gifts of corn and brass bowls of water were placed on the altar. Rats scurried about, interrupted from their meal."

His facial muscles grew rigid.

"Deep under the spell of the place, I fully expected to see the horrible features of Yama, god of the infernal regions, leaning over me. I watched the sacred dog, a mongrel of the filthiest sort, as he paced back and forth outside the grotto of Sande-puk.

"It was a place of the dead, and I was about to leave it hurriedly when a procession of monks came slowly up the hill from the monastery. I wasn't supposed to be here alone. Frightened, I hid in the darkness and they entered the temple.

"They went directly to the grotto and two of them entered and placed a threadbare rug on the stone floor. One of their members entered the grotto and kneeled there alone. It was then that I received the shock. I'll never quite forget it. They all set to work calmly to seal the grotto. They closed every crack through which light might seep. They left only a small, dirty gutter at the bottom. When the task was finished, they prayed, clicked their little prayer wheels and left that monk alone, sealed in a crypt, without light or warmth."

HE PASSED his hand over his eyes. Ford was stirred deeply, even in re-living the scene.

"Long after—I think three months, I learned the story. The Old Lama of the monastery told me that the Nameless Monk had chosen to enter the grotto and end his life there in prayer

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and meditation. He would be fed daily through the gutter. He would be without light, and when the winter came, only his tattered robe would warm his body. He would wait, perhaps a year, perhaps fifty years, until at last he would stretch out his skinny arms and greet death in the form of a splendid, brilliant rainbow of light. Then and only then would his soul be cleansed and ready for its reward."

Ford stared at me intently.

"Do you realize what effect that secret can have on a man? Do you know the hell it opened up for me?"

I shook my head. I didn't trust my voice.

"I couldn't stand it," he said, and gulped half a glass of scotch. "Every day for twelve long months, I watched a single monk climb the hill to the temple. For a long year, I watched him with the bowl of food which he would push along the slimy sides of the gutter to the *thing* that lived beyond the wall.

His voice was shaking.

"Do you think I could go on living, and knowing that a *man,* a breathing, suffering mortal was sealed beyond that wall? Every night I dreamed of him. I saw him sitting there, eyes glazed over, arms hanging at his sides, waiting —for death. Death that might be kind and overtake him soon. Death that might wait fifty long year before it greeted him with cold arms. I lay awake, listening to that sacred dog howling out his lungs in the freezing stillness of the Tibetan night. I was going crazy. One night I had had enough.

"I left the monastery quietly and studied the hillside, naked under the moon. There was no one abroad for it was late. I hurried to the temple and listened, bending with my ear close to the gutter. There was no sound,

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and yet I knew that he was alive, for each day the bowl that carried food to him, returned empty.

"I found a slab of stone, and ripped it from the altar. The sacred dog was highly agitated by the whole thing. He sat on his haunches, growling and snarling, but never daring to come near. I was a madman by then, thinking only that I must save a mortal from slow death. I started hacking away at the wall.

"It was back-breaking work, but at last, every muscle in my body aching, perspiration pouring down my face, I managed to break open a small hole. It seemed hours before I had an opening large enough to crawl through. On my hands and knees, I found my way into the crypt. He was there all right, and he was alive.

"His eyes were sightless. He was hardly more that a skeleton, covered by pale, unhealthy skin, and clothed in the filthy remnants of his robe. He had no power to protest and I forced him through the hole and he tottered and fell flat on the cold stone floor of the temple."

JASON FORD trembled from head to foot. His arms, suddenly relaxed, dropped to the leather arms of the chair. He sighed.

"The cold night air hit his body, and he shivered—and died. The shock had been too great. The man had lived for a year in his tomb, and now, finding life once more, had been unable to face it. They found us there, for I had pressed myself close to his poor, freezing body, trying to force some of my own heat into it—trying to save something that could not be saved. They left the frame of him there in the temple and it was devoured, as is the custom, by the sacred dog."

Ford was utterly exhausted by his

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story. Now his voice became stronger and a touch of irony entered it.

They did not punish me. They said I was no longer fit to be one of them. I was at liberty to leave Tibet, but should I ever come that way again, I would be be-headed.

"All hope for the Nameless Monk, they said, was gone. I had taken away his only chance to enter a heavenly place, and his soul would be consigned to purgatory. They told me that, and prayed for *me*, that the Nameless Monk would not return and wreak his vengeance upon me for what I had done."

The story might have ended there. It didn't. Jason Ford left Washington a week later. I spent several months in South America, and had what I imagine were some rather tame experiences compared with Ford's trip into the Dark Continent. Some time later, while resting a week at my Arizona home, I received this note from Vermont.

Dear Mark Billings:

I have settled for the summer in the town of Mayerville, Vermont. Come, when you have time, and we'll spend a week consuming a case of scotch which I brought with me from London. By the way, Mark, the sacred dog of the Temple of Linga is howling again. I'm afraid he means business.

Your Good Friend and
Drinking Companion,
Jason Ford

I hadn't planned a vacation. I didn't relish that trip east. I wanted to sit alone on my own front porch, absorbing good whiskey and admiring the barren beauty of the desert.

The sacred dog of the Temple of Linga . . .

I caught a plane from Tuscon and arrived in New York the following

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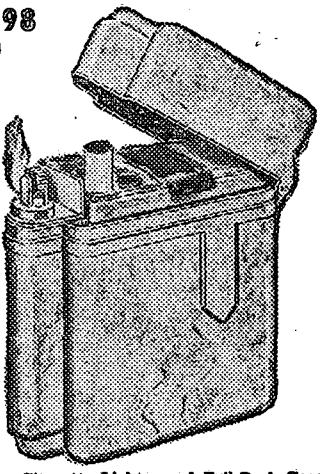

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morning. A fast train dropped me off at Mayerville, Vermont, just two days after I left home. It was a sleepy little farmer's town, hidden under the brow of a vast, evergreen clad mountain. I had some trouble finding a man who knew where Jason Ford had settled, but at last the clerk at the local grocery store gave me the necessary instructions for finding him.

There was no taxi at Mayerville, so I walked the entire five miles to the lonely little shingled cottage built well back from the equally lonely road.

I wish I had never found it.

THE house was neat appearing from the outside, and hidden among the pines about fifty yards from the rutted road. It was very old, with two windows and a single door that stared down at me like a weather-beaten face, and not at all friendly in its learing intentness. The shingles were brown and aged, and the white trim was chipping off.

There was a lean-to kitchen attached to the rear of the place, and the whole thing seemed to be supported by the steep hill at the rear, against which the lean-to was built. I had often seen the arrangement, built in a manner to allow a tunnel into the hillside, where food was preserved from the warmth of summer weather.

My knock brought only the sudden response of a barking dog. I don't know why the sound chilled my blood, but I remembered at once the sacred dog and the fact that Ford had mentioned the beast in his letter. I knocked several times, and finally, in desperation, I tried the door. It was open.

Until now, I had cursed myself for coming so far, only to find that Jason Ford had never so much as entered this place. I knew at once that he was here, or had been, for about the dusty front room was stacked trunk upon trunk,

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and pieces of his equipment were in evidence immediately. My eyes noted the elephant tusk tossed into a corner, and the African witch-doctor's headpiece hanging on its tip. Across one of the trunks lay the brilliant red robe and peaked cap of a Tibetan monk.

"Jason," I called. "It's Mark Billings, and I'm damned well thirsty."

No reply. The dog sneaked into the room, his tail curled tightly between his legs, and stood by the door with his teeth barred. I called again, but I didn't *expect* an answer. The dog, a mangy, filthy creature, growled at me.

I went toward him slowly, and tried to quiet him with my voice. I knew that I must pet him if possible and assure him that I was a friend. He would have nothing to do with me, but turned and slunk into the kitchen.

I had decided to search the entire house, then leave a note for Jason and return, for the night, to Mayerville. Jason would probably show up by tomorrow. I could hardly blame him for not being at home, for I hadn't notified him that I was coming.

I entered the kitchen. I had been right about the lean-to. Evidently the wall had been cut through to the hill, and a tunnel constructed into the rock. These tunnels made excellent storage places for all manner of foods.

One thing troubled me deeply. *The place where the wall of the house had been cut through, was sealed up tightly with huge, well worn slabs of rock.*

The dog howled at that moment, crossed the floor and stretched his lean frame out against the pine flooring. He pressed himself tightly to the rock wall, as though he was guarding whatever lay beyond.

I stared about the dark kitchen, and a feeling of indescribable horror came over me. The kitchen range, a wood burner, was rusted and in terrible con-

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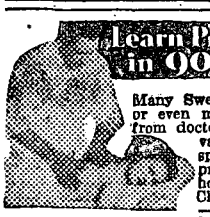

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dition. On its top were two brass bowls. One was filled with dried, shelled corn. The other was half full of dirty water. A little row of god images stared at me from the semi-darkness. At this moment, I knew that the wall was more than the sealed entrance to a cold-celler. It was a reproduction of the Samdepuk, grotto of the doomed monk.

Jason Ford was sealed behind that wall, and he was not sealed there by his own hand. I can't attempt to explain my reasoning, for I did not try to explain it logically. The stones were all in place, smooth and thick, and sealed from the outside.

I knew that I would never open the crypt.

I should. I should tear those stones down as fast as I could, and attempt to rescue what lay behind that wall. Jason Ford had not chosen this place for his home. He had been lured here, and had been sealed into that tunnel.

THERE was a sickening fear inside me. Once a monk had been sealed within a grotto. He had gone there of his own accord, and a white man had delivered him from a fate that he had been willing to face. The monk had had his revenge.

Jason Ford was alive, I thought. He would remain alive for a time, and I was, in reality, standing in the Temple of Linga, staring at the grotto and at the altar. I was alone here, with the sacred dog, and . . . ?

The dog howled at that moment, and I tried to thrust from my mind the image of the sniveling, groveling creature behind the wall. I tried to pray for strength, but prayer failed me in the presence of those Tibetan gods. I saw monks parading before me as shadows. Their weird peaked caps hid their faces, so that I was aware only of coal-black, accusing eyes.

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I knew that I wasn't capable of saving Jason Ford's life.

Most of all, I was incapable of facing the torture that was sure to come to me if I chose to tear down that wall. A coward? Yes! Of course I'm a coward. I think you might have been a coward also, if you had to dream of being sealed into the cold, dark grotto of Samdepuk.

I think you would have fled as I did, with the howl of the sacred dog echoing in your ears. I think you would have shivered in wretchedness until you were safely aboard your train, and then, in the privacy of your compartment, buried your head in your arms and sobbed like a child.

I can't be sure that all men are as cowardly as I.

Perhaps they found Jason Ford's body. If they did, the storekeeper no doubt remembered that I had asked him where I could find Ford. I was never seen in or about Mayerville after that night. I suppose they called it murder and blamed the whole incident upon me, the "mysterious visitor." It's just as well.

I wonder if, locked behind that wall, alone with his thoughts, Jason Ford finally found the true salvation? I know that I am too much of a coward to interfere with the affairs of ghostly Tibetan monks. Perhaps if you had been there, events would have turned out otherwise. Perhaps you would have torn down the wall and found him alive.

If you had, perhaps *you* would have been sealed in such a place. Perhaps you would have been taught the words that Jason Ford must have found ample time to repeat over and over, desperately, behind the wall of his carrion crypt.

Om-mani-padme-hum — Salvation is found only in the true faith.

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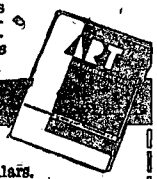

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(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

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On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build

that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

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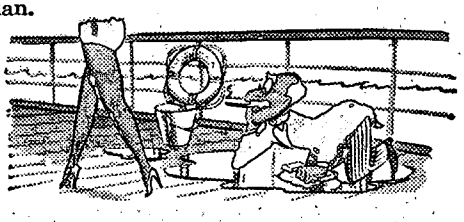

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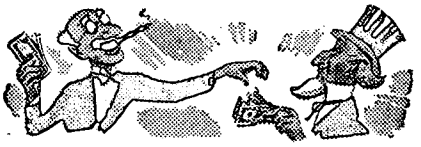

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